Rolling Stone
APRIL 2024
ISSUE 1386

peso pluma

PRESENTS THE

future of music

FEATURING

Young Miko

Teezo Touchdown

Faye Webster

Veeze

Le Sserafim

Peggy Gou

Black Sherif

J Noa

Chappell Roan

Young Nudy

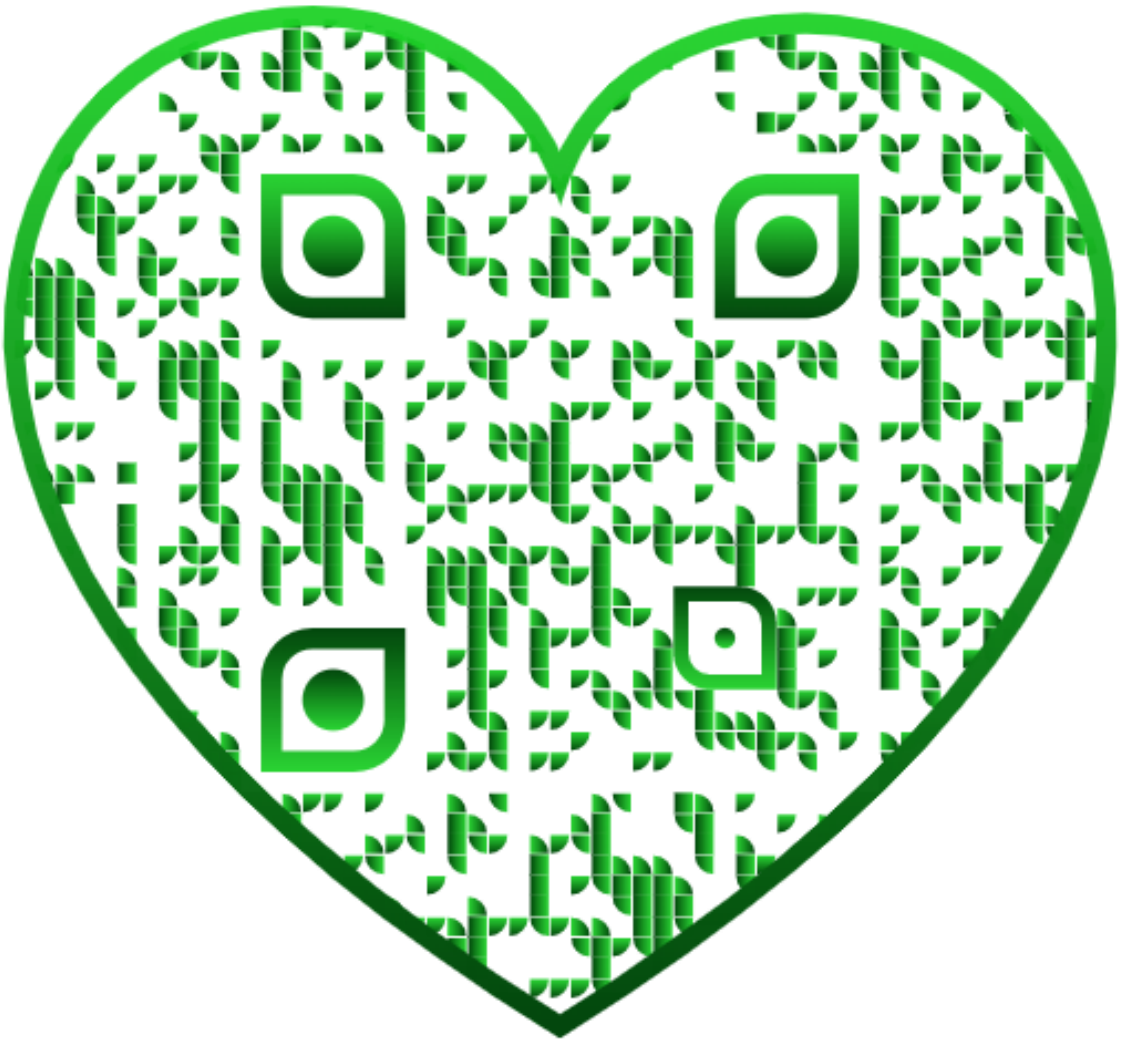
Saiko

Jasiel Nuñez

Samia

Wyatt Flores

AND MORE



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RS
ISSUE 1386
'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

future of music

Our annual survey of the artists, trends, and tech shaping the music of tomorrow — from the Future 25 (curated with our cover star) to a ChatGPT for music.

FEATURING:

peso pluma takes on the world

He shot out of Mexico to become the biggest new artist on the planet. Now, can he navigate a unique kind of stardom? **p. 32**
By Julyssa Lopez

"Sometimes I feel like the car is going really fast and I'm just holding on for dear life."
YOUNG MIKO

WALLET CHAIN BY CNNTRA. GLASSES AND JEWELRY BY KWK BY KAY KWOK. T-SHIRT AND SKIRT BY NEW BED STUY. SOCKS AND SHOES BY PRAYING.

PLUS

future 25

CURATED WITH PESO PLUMA

Faye Webster

She's won over a legion of fans with her funny, relatable lyrics and a tough-to-pin-down sound. Next up: handling the anxieties and pressures of serious stardom. **p. 42**
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Superstars on his side, haters yelling in his ear: the life of a wildly stylish, genre-smashing rap-rock star. **p. 48**
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Young Miko

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PHOTOGRAPH BY **Thalia Gochez**

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Peso Pluma photographed in Los Angeles on Jan. 30, 2024, by **Gustavo Soriano**.

Produced by Rhianna Rule for Palm Productions. Photography direction by Emma Reeves. Styling by Anastasia Walker. Hair/Barber: David Thomas. Grooming by Dani Perez. Studio: Hubble Studio. Outfit by Dolce & Gabbana. Earring by Chrome Hearts.

FROM TOP: JIM HERRINGTON; EDDIE MOORE/"ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL"/ZUMA

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Griffin Lotz**

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Voices *of the* Movement

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALEXA HUDGENS

Yuli

Yuli is a Grammy-nominated instrumentalist and producer who has worked on records for Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Doja Cat, and SZA. Her blend of classically trained sensibilities and talent as a producer and artist have made her one of the most in-demand collaborators in the business.

Welcome to Voices of the Movement, a sponsored series presented by Olay Body. Rolling Stone and Olay Body are committed to elevating women who are a force of change in the music industry.

In this series, Olay Body brought together some of the most dynamic and inspiring female leaders from across the music industry to talk about their journeys and how they're fighting for inclusivity and representation. They are mold breakers - women who rose to the top of their occupations and are constantly searching for ways to uplift those just starting out.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STONY JOHNSON

Suni MF

Suni MF is a groundbreaking artist and songwriter from Atlanta, GA who has worked with Flo Milli, Rico Nasty and Sukihanna. She's also appeared on Issa Rae's Max show "Rap Sh!t" performing her viral single "Easy Money".

ROLLING STONE: WHAT DID YOUR JOURNEYS THROUGH THE MUSIC INDUSTRY LOOK LIKE?

SUNI MF: In the 90s, I felt like I always had to bring an extra energy to rapping, because I felt, as a woman, it was a little bit harder starting at the bottom at the open mics and trying to see if you really got what it takes. When there was a woman that went up, everybody would lose interest in her versus a guy.

I remember looking for someone who looked like me on TV, you know, looking for some type of representation. People always used to say Queen Latifah and that is something I felt like I needed just so I could see myself through her.

YULI: The path wasn't clear to me right away because I was trained as a classical musician. When I was younger, I would see people play in an orchestra and wonder what comes after that. Once I got into college and started doing small ensembles and started listening to popular music, I saw people playing and writing in a more commercial space.

That led me into the studio culture. Once I was in the studio, I saw how songs were created. I got a second education after I graduated from college because I was in the studio watching how people put things together. Once I was there, I fell in love and knew it was my path.

ROLLING STONE: HOW HAS REPRESENTATION FOR WOMEN CHANGED DURING YOUR TIME IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY?

SUNI MF: I think we have great representation now. Now there are all spectrums of women in music. You got all different types of flavors. I used to have to go against people who didn't think a gay female rapper would really thrive. I used to be shocked and appalled. I just didn't understand. I used to have people telling me they didn't think the world was ready for a gay female rapper.

YULI: I feel like there hasn't been a huge shift. Most of the time when I work in a studio, the engineer is a guy, the other producers are guys. It's a boys' club.

But I will say that I've had great experiences when I've done camps that make it a priority to invite women. I did one recently in Nashville and there were a lot of talented female songwriters and artists that I connected with. There's also been more dedicated spaces within the industry where they're like, "Look, we need to tackle this." There are also organizations like Girls Make Beats that I've worked with before. It's a beautiful studio, and they're teaching these little 10- and 11-year-old girls how to DJ and produce and it's dope.

ROLLING STONE: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU GIVE TO YOUNGER WOMEN WHO ARE COMING UP IN MUSIC?

SUNI MF: Spend more time thinking and planning. Have time to think about big ideas. I feel like the more time alone you have, the more time you can really sit and think about what you want versus being pulled this way and that way from the masses or from the influence of social media or from your peers. Success is so different for everybody, and a lot of people try to shove one definition of success down your throat. There are so many ways to make it in the music industry. Success is different for everybody, just like every time you hear a beat or a melody everyone has a different song in their head.

YULI: Number one is to not compare yourself. We're in a social media age. People compare themselves all the time. When you do that, you rob yourself of the opportunity to be you. If you're worried about what everyone else is doing and where they are on their path, it leaves no space for you to figure out what you're about and what your voice is.

You also must be patient with yourself and be patient with the process. You don't know what song is going to hit. You don't know what's going to connect with people. It could be tomorrow, it could be two years from now, it could be a song you made three years ago, you just don't know. When you're so focused on the outcome, you miss the journey and rush yourself.

Women in music have always been forced to look, sound, and act a certain way. But that's changing, and artists like Suni MF and Yuli are at the forefront of that transformation. The work still isn't done, of course, and won't be until women are allowed to bring their entire selves to the stage and recording studio without feeling the pressure of expectations. As Yuli said in our interview, "I would love to see a world where there are prominent artists that are just chilling, being themselves 100%."

Olay Body is committed to exploring the intersection of science and beauty, creating products that reflect every hue and shape. Grounded in their dedication to representation and empowerment, Olay Body is supporting women who are fighting to make their professions more inclusive.

Presented by OLAY BODY

Contributors

COVER STORY

A Deep Connection With Peso Pluma

Gustavo Soriano
Photographer

Mexican American photographer Gustavo Soriano was raised by a tattoo artist and an illustrator, and he's been around art his whole life. He's devoted his career to capturing inner-city youth culture in his native Los Angeles. "All my work stems from my personal life," Soriano explains. When he shot Peso Pluma's Future of Music cover, he felt an immediate kinship with the Mexican singer, admiring how the artist "best represents corridos in a way I haven't seen in a long time." In the cover image, Peso is serious as he adjusts the hood of his open jacket, his "All Eyez on Me" chest tattoo expertly illuminated. Much of his bare torso is immersed in shadows, something Soriano did to convey the "dark, moody world" of Peso's breakthrough album, *Génesis*. Soriano photographed Rema and Swizz Beats for *Rolling Stone*'s Musicians on Musicians issue last fall.

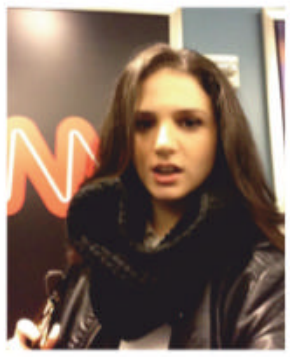
Soriano in Chiriaco Summit, California, 2019

On the Island With Young Miko

Frances Solá-Santiago
Contributor

Frances Solá-Santiago has interviewed Young Miko three times for *Rolling Stone*, but their most recent conversation was her favorite (p. 54). Solá-Santiago went to Puerto Rico, where she and Miko are from, to explore the rapper's meteoric rise. "The way that she has catapulted to fame has been incredible to watch as a reporter," Solá-Santiago says. She chatted with Miko for last year's Future 25 list and for a 2023 feature on reggaetoneras changing the island.

Meeting the Real Trisha Paytas



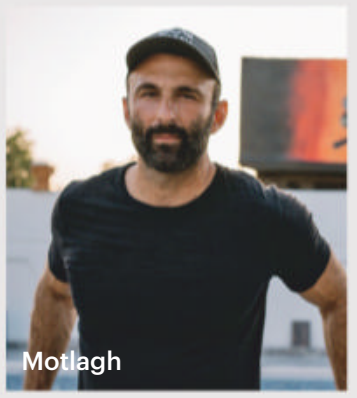
EJ Dickson
Senior Writer

EJ Dickson had a specific question in mind when she interviewed YouTube star Trisha Paytas (p. 62): "Who is the person behind the artifice?" She found that Paytas is "very chill" — and that beyond a hot-pink nursery and bedazzled tiger statue, her home "looked exactly like your average parent-of-a-toddler's house." Dickson, a mother of two, has written for *Rolling Stone* since 2016, and she's working on the book *One Bad Mother: In Praise of Psycho Housewives, Stage Parents, and Momfluencers*.

UPDATE

Rolling Stone Wins Polk Award

Jason Motlagh is the 2024 recipient of the George Polk Awards' Sydney Schanberg Prize for his *Rolling Stone* piece "This Will End in Blood and Ashes," an unflinching look at gang wars in Haiti from the November 2023 issue. Motlagh, who has reported from a dozen global conflict zones over the past 17 years, first visited Haiti in 2006. "To be able to come back again and do this reporting has been very meaningful," he says.


Motlagh

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: FRANCESCA SOSTAR; MARA CORSINO; COURTESY OF EJ DICKSON. COURTESY OF JASON MOTLAGH

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NI

Fletcher Almost Lost It All

Illness brought her rock-star lifestyle to a halt. Now, she's healing in more ways than one

→

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Jessica Lehrman** | **11**

FLETCHER

CARI FLETCHER knew something was wrong. After finishing a run of shows in the spring of 2023, she felt deeply run down – and it wasn't just the usual aches and pains of life on the road. The singer, who performs as Fletcher, went to the doctor and learned she had Lyme disease, a bacterial infection that can cause debilitating fatigue and neurological complications. It can also result in inflammation and damage to the nerves in the voice box – meaning Fletcher was faced with the terrifying prospect of being left permanently unable to sing. "There were many, many, many moments over the last year where I was not sure if I was going to return to music," Fletcher, who turned 30 on March 19, says.

By the time she was diagnosed, Fletcher had established herself as one of pop's most versatile stars. She can pen a heartbreak ballad or craft a raucous dance hit. She doesn't shy away from the controversial or the confessional – this is an artist who made music videos for an EP titled *The S(ex) Tapes,* with the ex-girlfriend the EP was about. She can talk spicy ("I just had sex with my ex/In a New York apartment/Ooh, I thought it'd be harmless)" and be the topic of conversation up and down your For You Page. Suddenly, she worried it might all be over.

Fletcher shared her diagnosis on social media and postponed some overseas dates. Marquee letters came down. Comments sections went quiet. Fletcher became a recluse. "I noticed all the other things that got really loud in the time that I got really quiet, and it was the darkness that was in my own mind," she says. "I had to sit with 'Who am I without the applause? Who am I without the analytics and the numbers?' It brought a lot to the surface about self-worth and my beliefs and my gifts and my talents."

Fletcher, who was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey, and raised on Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen, moved back home for treatment, posting up in her childhood bedroom. A typical day for her this past summer started with a hot-girl walk by the soccer fields on which she grew up playing; maybe a bike ride by the inlet; some meditation, some journaling, and a lot of checking in on how her body was feeling.

As she slowly got better, she packed her complicated feelings into an album that comes from Cari, the person, as much as Fletcher, the pop star. *In Search of the Antidote*, out March 22, is an ode to all of the forms of healing Fletcher has gone through in the past 12 months. "My mom would cook us spaghetti and meatballs," she says of being back in Jersey. "We'd go home, have some pasta, and shoot back over to the studio to keep creating."

The artist known for singing about her rock-star lifestyle and heartbreak-numbing libations now has a different focus and aura. The day after the Grammys, Fletcher sits at a booth in a cafe behind the Hollywood Hills sipping a peppermint tea, manifesting a nomination for herself in the future, and reflecting on some of the most vulnerable times in her life. *In Search of the Antidote* is full of raw emotion, teetering between extreme confidence and despair. On the album's scalding, sarcastic opener, Fletcher wonders if she's ruining her own life by lashing out at everything she loves; on the warm, breezy closer, she finds a sense of peace. Crisp ballads and alt-pop-punk "bops" (her words) come in between.

The focus is healing, but it's not all love and light. There's still a healthy dose of mess. On "Doing Better," Fletcher sings about an ex's new girlfriend, who was also the focus of her 2022 hit "Becky's So Hot." The singer kicks off the second verse of the new song with, "Your girlfriend never thanked me/For making her go viral/Fuck it, I'm her idol."

She wrote the album's lead single, "Eras of Us," after running into that same ex (whom she calls "one of my greatest loves") during a stop on Taylor Swift's Eras Tour at MetLife Stadium. It was tough to see someone with whom she had so much history, but she knew a song would almost certainly come from the experience. (Swift, by the way, is a fan, having told Fletcher how much she loved the lyrics of her 2019 hit "Undrunk.")

Fletcher, a champion of sexual fluidity who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community, winces at the idea of labeling her sexuality. "I love women, and women are beautiful, and they've been my muses," she says. "But I have found a lot more freedom in the expansion of releasing the idea that I have to be something all the time.

"If somebody had to put a label on me of queerness … but even that, it's just … I don't know. I just am. I just am…." She trails off. Her tone is mildly exasperated as she looks for the words to describe the energy she feels around those who inspire her songs. So what makes a Fletcher muse? That, the singer is eager to talk about. "I have a lot more muses than people think I do. People think that songs are just about one specific person," she says, with a hint of pride.

Fletcher is still getting treatment for her Lyme disease and leaning on a support system that comprises family and friends – including Miley Cyrus, who Fletcher linked up with when the two performed sultry renditions of "Becky's So Hot" and "Midnight Sky" on Cyrus' New Year's Eve television special. "Her heart is so big, and she just gives so much presence and attention, and listens to you," Fletcher says of Cyrus. "I feel really lucky to have her energy and her presence in my life, and also the ways that she lifted me up."

After our conversation at the cafe, Fletcher pays up front, hugs me goodbye, and walks out the door. Once she's out of earshot, a couple of waiters look her up on Spotify and one plays "Becky's So Hot." In the viral hit, Fletcher sings, "She's the one I should hate/But I wanna know how she tastes." It's a messy girl anthem – the kind of mess Fletcher continues to heal from but hasn't completely shunned just yet.

These days are quieter for Fletcher. She wants to stick around as an artist, to play the long game – one that'd be impossible were she living the life she was in 2022. "My life used to be signing boobs and tequila shots," Fletcher had said as she finished her tea. Still, the chaos isn't gone. Sure, she drinks less and listens to her body more, but …

"I'm still signing tits. That's not changing."

WAISS ARAMESH

FAST FACTS

JERSEY GIRL
Fletcher was born in Asbury Park, N.J. Unshockingly, she loves Bruce Springsteen: "He's molded so much of the way in which I write."

DRAMA-RAMA
She once made videos for an EP called *The S(ex) Tapes* with the ex the EP was about.

TRUE SWIFTIE
Fletcher is a big Taylor Swift fan. When Swift praised the lyrics to Fletcher's song "Undrunk," she says, "I nearly fainted and passed away at that moment."

HAIR BY CLAYTON HAWKINS AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING DOVE. MAKEUP BY LILLY KEYS AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING BEAUTY PIE. STYLING BY MARC ERAM AT A-FRAME AGENCY. PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE: OUTFIT BY PARIS GEORGIA. BOOTS BY ACNE STUDIOS. BRA: AGENT PROVOCATEUR.

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TOUR DIARY

Idles' Big New York Appetite

TO SECURE AN OPENING SLOT for the Foo Fighters in 2017, Idles sent Dave Grohl and Co. a jigsaw puzzle depicting bassist Adam Devonshire reclining on his couch in his underwear. When the British rock band headlined Bowery Ballroom in early February, an enterprising baby band tried its luck scoring a similar opportunity by delivering Idles a pizza, the box reading, "If you build it, they will come." Guitarist Mark Bowen says the gesture was much appreciated – and that the group is currently "on the shortlist." Pizza enthusiasts to the core, the band is always down to play New York City, which, they say, matches their onstage energy. "It seems to be the most in-tune place we've been to," Bowen says. "There's this aggressive sound, there's raucousness, there's chaos, there's dissonance, but there's also love and empathy." It was the perfect place, then, to visit before dropping their fifth studio album, *Tangk*, in February. Still, Bowen says, celebrations are a bit more subdued these days. "It would've been a much more rock & roll thing if you were interviewing us at the early stages of the band," he says. "I guess we wouldn't really remember much of what we would be able to tell you. But these days, it's a nice chill time." BRENNA EHRLICH

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3

IN IDLES' HANDS? PIZZA AND JUICE

(1) Idles' first NYC show was for 13 people at Brooklyn DIY venue Flowers for All Occasions; now they're selling out the Bowery. **(2)** Their rider includes green-juice ingredients, chocolate, and nonalcoholic Guinness, which Bowen calls "unbelievable" when properly chilled. **(3)** The band goes on pizza crawls searching for the perfect dollar slice. "We'll cap it off at 12. That's excessive," Bowen says. "I wouldn't eat that every day, but it's going to give you lots of energy to burn off for the show."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Sacha Lecca and Griffin Lotz

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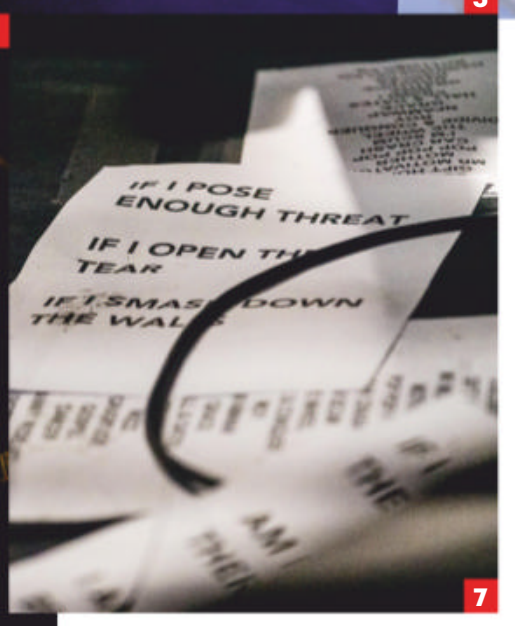

7

DANCERS AND MOSHERS

(1) To warm up for their high-energy gigs, bandmates take turns hanging like bats from a back stretcher before shows. **(2)** "There's a lot of noises as we stand up and sit down. We do everything we can to avoid injury," says Bowen, who is a blur of energy when playing his guitar onstage. **(3)** Labelmate and Lip Critic drummer Danny Eberle takes a ride in the pit. **(4)** Drummer Jon Beavis and his mates have some unique requests at every tour stop: chocolate milk, and, for Bowen, a postcard so that he can send notes to his children from the road. **(5)** Wild under the spotlights, frontman Joe Talbot and the band prefer to burn incense and chill behind the scenes. **(6)** After rocking out for two hours, Bowen and Co. forgo partying to catch up on lost sleep. **(7)** Talbot distributed lyrics from Idles' new album to the crowd.

PREVIOUS PAGE: GRIFFIN LOTZ, ALL. THIS PAGE: GRIFFIN LOTZ (5, 6); SACHA LECCA (1, 2, 3, 4, 7)

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INTERVIEW

Adam McKay's Made-You-Look Take on Climate Activism

The director is turning real-world absurdity on its head, using 'disruptive activism' to kick-start real change

By CHARISMA MADARANG

ADAM MCKAY would like to bring to your attention that the world is burning. "We're living in a ridiculous farcical comedy, but the consequences are real," says the director who turned a planet-ending comet into a metaphor for climate change in his film *Don't Look Up*. "We can't seem to get out of this cultural framework that we're trapped in, that just won't allow us to take in the enormity of it."

Last year, McKay launched Yellow Dot Studios, which produces videos and other media with sharp humor to spur urgency toward the climate crisis. He also sits on the board of directors for Climate Emergency Fund, a nonprofit that funds organizations committed to nonviolent climate activism. Among those groups is Climate Defiance, which targets politicians and corporate titans promoting and profiting from the fossil-fuel industries driving global warming to dangerous levels. Last year, the group hijacked events featuring Biden administration officials and shut down a gala honoring notorious ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods. McKay calls these kinds of made-you-look tactics "disruptive activism."

We caught up with McKay to talk about his activism, the upcoming election, that Margot Robbie scene, and the best- (and worst-) case scenario on climate change.

You've praised the activist group Climate Defiance for helping expose what you see as the passivity of the Democratic Party when it comes to protecting our environment. What do you think of the Biden administration's efforts?

I think they've been fairly terrible and disingenuous. When the IRA [Inflation Reduction Act] was passed, there were those great tax breaks for renewable energy in there, but there were also huge carve-outs for Big Oil. I would love to see someone do the math on [whether] this administration is carbon neutral, positive, or negative.

MAKING NOISE Director Adam McKay is on the board for the Climate Emergency Fund.

Do you see the subject of climate change being a big factor in how the upcoming election plays out?

I don't think it's on the radar for either political party. I think the donor money from Big Oil, automotives, the travel industry, it's just pulled so much sway. Corruption is corruption, but when [it] becomes a culture, that's when it really gets powerful.

The only thing that I've experienced that's really moved the needle is old-fashioned, disruptive activism. I had an aha moment when I really got involved in it, because the second you look at history, the main ingredients of all huge change – whether it's civil rights, independence, the labor movement – it's always disruptive activism.

How does your work with the Climate Emergency Fund and Climate Defiance help support this goal of using the art of the uncomfortable to move public opinion?

"The only thing that I've experienced that's really moved the needle is old-fashioned, disruptive activism."

Similarly, in the sense that both approaches are human, muscular emotional approaches. I think the, quote, truth, has been sold and arbitrated and parsed so much over the past – really since the rise of neoliberalism over the past 40 years – that we need to go to that muscular sense. It's why I decided to make *Don't Look Up* a big, farcical comedy, because I realize you can't fake laughter.

A great example is the Air Force [serviceman] who self-immolated as a protest against what's going on in Gaza. You can't fake that, it's so sincere, his mission statement was so clear. That's a very extreme example. But a similar dynamic happens when you see young people getting arrested for blocking the entrance of a bank that finances oil extraction. Whether people know it consciously or not, the question starts to rise up: Why would anyone do this? Why would they get arrested? Why would they put their life in unpleasant turmoil unless something was going on? And you'll see corporate media create distractions; they'll minimize, they'll question their tactics – sort of feign obliviousness.

It's incredible stuff, and it's gaining momentum. It's gaining power. It's starting to break through. The majority of my efforts now are focused toward disruptive activism and making things through Yellow Dot.

In your film *The Big Short*, Margot Robbie explains the stock market – while in a bathtub. How do you use this comic tool in the realm of activism and your work with Yellow Dot?

Every single day, we're getting blasted with advertising, whether it's pop-up ads, TV ads, billboards. So we're under a constant bombardment of feelings, emotional manipulation. We're being hit with sexy images, angry images, peaceful images – all as a way to deceive us to make us buy stuff.... It was just an opportunity to use that language in a way that was counter to what it's usually used for, to point it out, to get a laugh, and then get to the real information. The times where we're really able to name it, we get tremendous reactions

I ask this question because of that big *Don't Look Up* ending: What is your best-case scenario for the world and worst-case scenario?

Best case is weather events are so strange and so large that it knocks people awake, they come out of this fugue state they've been in. I think regular people are actually surprisingly clued in, but the big thing they're missing is the urgency. And off of that, we go into full-on, emergency-footing World War II–style mobilization. We create massive worldwide research projects about how to remove carbon at scale, how to time it right.... We come up with emergency water plans, food-delivery plans, ways to protect crops.

The worst, the more pessimistic view, is that these weather events get larger, more bizarre, more destructive, and the majority of us never wake up; that these systems ... are so entrenched in that corrupt culture that it's not a temporary state; it's more like brain damage, and they're not able to wake up. In which case, you'll start to see fracturing little communities scrambling to stay alive.

There will never be a success moment, but we just look at it like breadcrumbs. If they're out there, there may be a moment where those breadcrumbs become kind of a meal. There's plenty to be done, and our motto is "Constantly Onward."

RINGO CHIU/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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NEW BEGINNINGS

A. Chal Is Banking on Himself

After parting ways with his label, reconnecting with his roots, and returning to New York, A. Chal is back to creating music on his terms

By BRENDA BARRIENTOS

IN 2021, ALEJANDRO "A. CHAL" Salazar walked away from everything he thought he always wanted.

Up until then, the Peruvian-born singer-songwriter and producer had spent three years signed to Epic Records under Sony Music. He established his hazy, rap-meets-R&B sound on bilingual releases like 2016's *Welcome to Gazi,* 2017's *On Gaz,* and 2018's *Exotigaz,* his first under Epic. Through those projects, he landed hits like "Love N Hennessy" and "000000," which today have more than 40 million and 68 million Spotify streams, respectively. But despite the success, Salazar was starting to feel like he was losing control over the creative direction of his work.

"To be honest, I would hear '000000' and feel like I was listening to a Justin Bieber record," Salazar says. "I cared about having 'hits,' but if the people around me weren't seeing what I was seeing, I had to take a couple of steps back before I lost my power." As popular as songs like "000000" were, they led to bigger questions about what he wanted to say in his music: "One day, one of my friends told me, 'Damn, you have so much more depth to you than what you've put out there. I wish people knew that.' That really hit home for me."

Following his 2021 project *Far From Gaz*, Salazar decided to part ways with his label. "It was a mutual decision," he says. "I was thinking about how I was going to age as an artist, as opposed to just milking fuckboy Latin anthems."

To figure out who he wanted to be as an artist, Salazar had to start from the beginning: He was born in Lima and raised in Trujillo, a coastal city in northwestern Peru; he moved to Queens, New York, with his parents when he was five years old. Though he spent a lot of his adolescent years growing up in Boston, he attributes a lot of his musical versatility to Jackson Heights, the Queens melting pot where he was always surrounded by a multitude of cultures. "My family used to play a lot of Andean flute music, with guitars, and huayno, and then I came here and I heard rap, R&B, and rock music for the first time," he says.

Salazar started pursuing music when he was in high school. His stage name, "A. Chal," is an homage to his younger brother, Icchal, who died shortly after birth following complications. The name "Icchal," from the native Indigenous language Quechua, is also a mountain that his father grew up near in Peru.

After leaving his label, Salazar took a two-year hiatus to get reinspired and figure out what would come next for him. He had been living in Los Angeles, but he started traveling around the world and spent time back in Trujillo, connecting deeply with his roots. In between, there was plenty of uncertainty. "I've run into people who met me in 2017, '18, and they would ask me, 'Do you still make music?' " Salazar says. "I would feel like I had to explain myself because I'm trying to prove to people that I'm still worthy. I'm still good."

"I was thinking about how I was going to age as an artist, as opposed to just milking fuckboy Latin anthems."

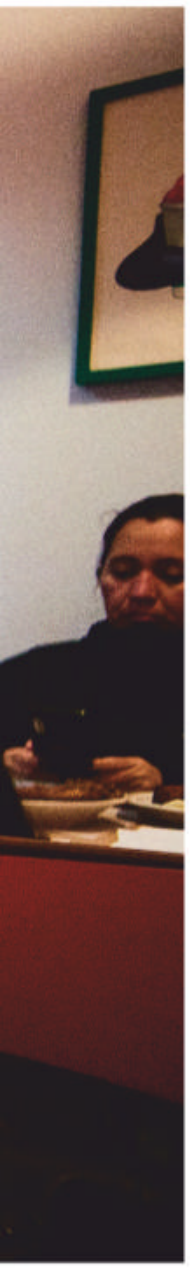
Now, he's ready to remind the world exactly who he is. *Espíritu*, his new 14-track album, is his most intentional to date. "This project is setting the foundation for this new chapter of me," he says. "I'm starting from scratch." It's a testament to his evolution, with the visuals and production choices embracing his Peruvian indigeneity more than ever. Salazar also honors the ancestors and the spiritual rituals that shaped him as an artist. "I was giving you a vibe before – this is more than that, this is me now."

▲ DIY DREAMER
"There are times when I question whether I'm making the right decision, but the more I move forward, the more that feeling goes away," Salazar says of his career.

He's taking a chance on himself – with no team, no management, no label. AJ Ramos, YouTube's head of Artist Partnerships for Latin Music and Culture, has known Salazar for the past eight years and has seen the multiple transitions in his career. "From being an independent artist to being signed to a major label to coming back to being an independent artist, he's matured," Ramos says. "He understands no one is going to go harder on his career than him."

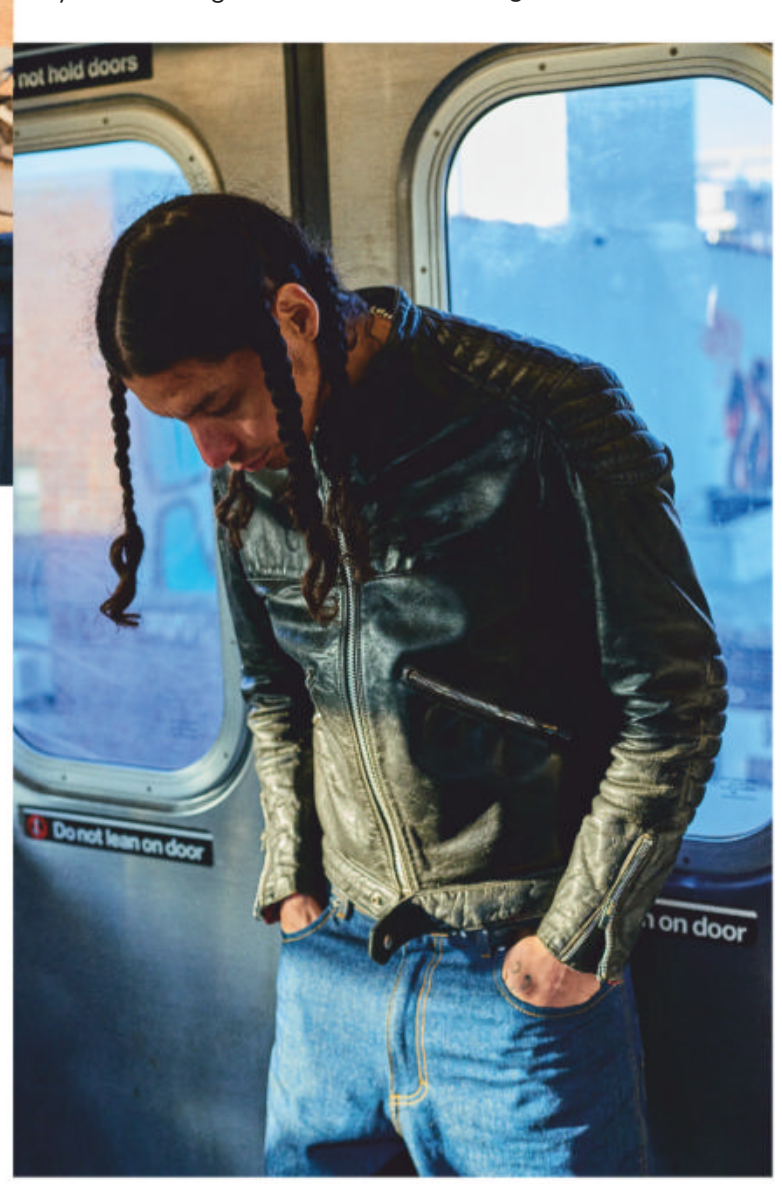
And Salazar is going all in: He's currently plotting a North American tour in the spring. No part of him regrets betting on himself. "I don't know what will happen after this. Maybe it all goes bad," he says. "In my head, I see it though. I see the future, and it's good."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Xavier Scott Marshall**



◀ BRED IN QUEENS
Jackson Heights in Queens is a special place for Salazar. He moved there when he was five, and after briefly living in Los Angeles, he's back now. "I fell back in love with the city, 'cause to me New York is not necessarily about clout," he says. "It's more about your attitude and what type of energy you're walking with."

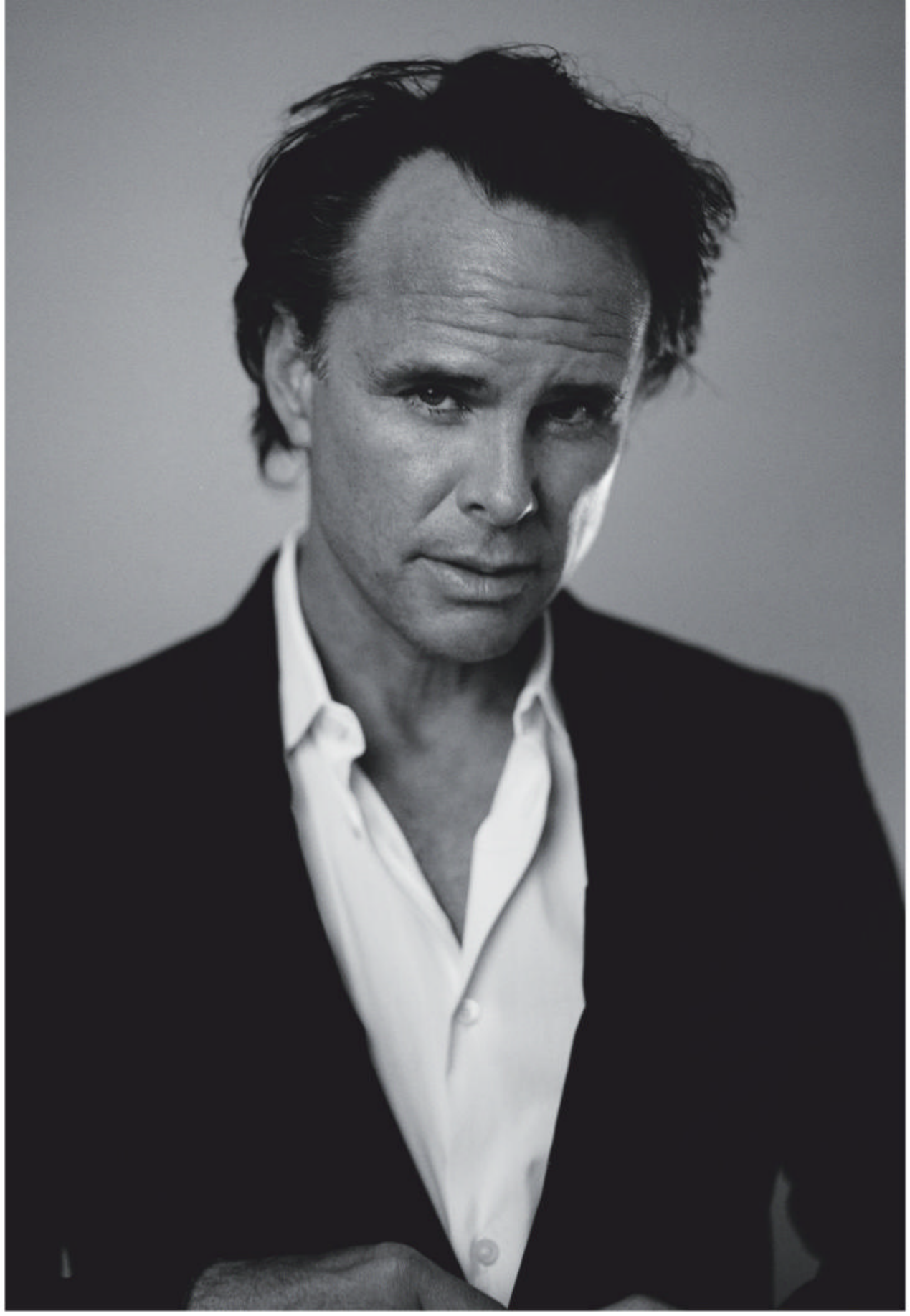
▼ SOUNDS OF THE CITY
Salazar remembers walking around Roosevelt Avenue with his mother, selling artificial flowers to offices and restaurants. He would take in the sights and sounds of the city: "I came here from a Spanish-speaking country, so words for me were my last bag of tools. My bag of tools was hearing different sounds."



▶ THE BIG PICTURE
Salazar says his new album, *Espíritu,* is his most intentional project to date. On the 14-track LP, he's more concerned about showing his artistry than anything else. "I played my dad the album and he was like, 'I love this album, but do you think it's going to be commercially a hit?'" Salazar says. "This album isn't about being commercially successful. It's about making a statement."

▲ RECORDING IN SESSION
During the creative process, Salazar traveled between Europe, Boston, Peru, and New York to get inspired. His latest songs change up his sound by drawing on the New Wave and punk-rock bands that he's always loved.

▶ DEEPLY IN TOUCH
While making his new album, Salazar dove deep into his Peruvian roots. "The essence of indigeneity is being in touch with the sun and moon," he says. "It's naturally in me. Any time I approach music, I look for that."



Q&A

Walton Goggins

The actor, set to appear in the third season of 'The White Lotus,' on 'Fallout,' 'Justified,' and being typecast as a hillbilly

By ALAN SEPINWALL

OVER THE COURSE of an acting career that began when he was a teenager fresh out of Georgia, Walton Goggins has played a crooked cop (*The Shield*), racist gunslingers (in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*), villains in both traditional superhero projects (*Ant-Man and the Wasp*) and off-kilter ones (*I'm a Virgo*), and even an elderly televangelist con man called Baby Billy on HBO's *The Righteous Gemstones*. Now, he has a dual role in Amazon's big-budget drama series adaptation of the video-game franchise *Fallout,* playing both the 200-year-old mutant killer the Ghoul, and the decent man he once was, B-movie Western star Cooper Howard.

Goggins is different in most ways from these people he embodies. But he and they tend to share one crucial trait: They can talk. A lot. His signature character, hillbilly gangster Boyd Crowder on *Justified,* was once praised for "using 40 words where four will do." And Goggins admits, "I've gotten a reputation for maybe making sense out of taking 10 minutes to say something that you could have said in 30 seconds."

When we meet the Ghoul, he says, "Well, well, well. Why, is this an Amish production of *The Count of Monte Cristo,* or the weirdest circle jerk I've ever been invited to?" I can't imagine anyone else delivering that line.

I'll take that as a compliment.

When did you realize that your gift with colorful dialogue was a reason people wanted to hire you?

Quentin was a fan of Boyd Crowder's loquacious diatribes or hyperboles. But I'd love to ask other people that have hired me, "What is it about the way that I say the things that I say that made you want to write the things that you write for me?" There's not an actor worth their weight in salt that doesn't find humanity in the things that are coming out of their mouth, and a life that is so much more rich than the words that they're speaking. Or why do it?

What appealed to you about these two *Fallout* characters?

It was a bit challenging for me to find both of them. Because you don't really understand one unless you understand the other. The Ghoul is a rascal, really. He's got a great sense of humor, but underneath that is a lot of pain. He's seen a lot and felt a lot and all the rest of it. And Cooper's a kind, patient, caring product of the Greatest Generation. He's about the best this country has to offer.

There's a rascally element to a number of the roles that you've played. Are you yourself rascally by nature?

I have the propensity, yeah, but the swagger that I have comes in spurts. For every hour of energy that I spend lighting up a room or trying to engage people, I need two or three hours to myself. I'm an introverted extrovert or an extroverted introvert – I suppose that's really my nature. But, yeah, I like to get in a little trouble.

When you came to L.A. as a teen, what kind of roles were you considered for?

[*Laughs.*] What do you think? Redneck Number One, or if not that, just some nefarious villain, or the goofy sheriff's deputy. *The Shield* was a big turning point for me.

How did you feel at the end of that job, and your character's tragic arc?

Lonely. Anger. Confusion. The end of an era, the loss of a job, the loss of friendships, the loss of a routine. I didn't know what life would be like on the other side of it. And the fall can be precipitous for those that have never experienced it and don't know how to calibrate their personal life on the other side of it. In some ways, I think people should teach a class on that: "This is how you start over." I would sign up for that class.

How did you feel when you were asked to play Baby Billy in *The Righteous Gemstones*?

Somewhere on the press tour for *Vice Principals,* Danny McBride told me he had it in his head that he wanted me to play this 70-year-old man. And I said, "If I could have a little bitty apartment inside your brain, and the rent is something I can afford, I'll do whatever comes out of it."

What's it like to play him?

It's exhausting. He is exhausting. He's a wild ride. But it's a lot of fun. We laugh a lot, and I have a great time doing it. At the end of the day, my fucking shoulder hurts walking the way that he walks, however he does his thing. I can't even do it on my own. If you asked me to do an impersonation of Baby Billy, I wouldn't even know what he does. When you put the makeup on and the wig, it's just him.

When you returned as Boyd at the end of *Justified: City Primeval,* was it easy to get back into character?

No, man. It took me sweating bullets outside of everybody else's eyes. I walked in a bathroom and looked in the mirror and said, "What the fuck are you doing here? What are you doing, Goggins?" And I felt that orange prison jumpsuit and said, "Just come from your truth, man, and walk in and let it rip, however it goes."

Would you want to play him again if they make another miniseries?

Absolutely, when we're all positioned. We all feel the same way about it, and we've let that be known. So we will see what happens if the stars align and the fates conspire.

SELA SHILONI

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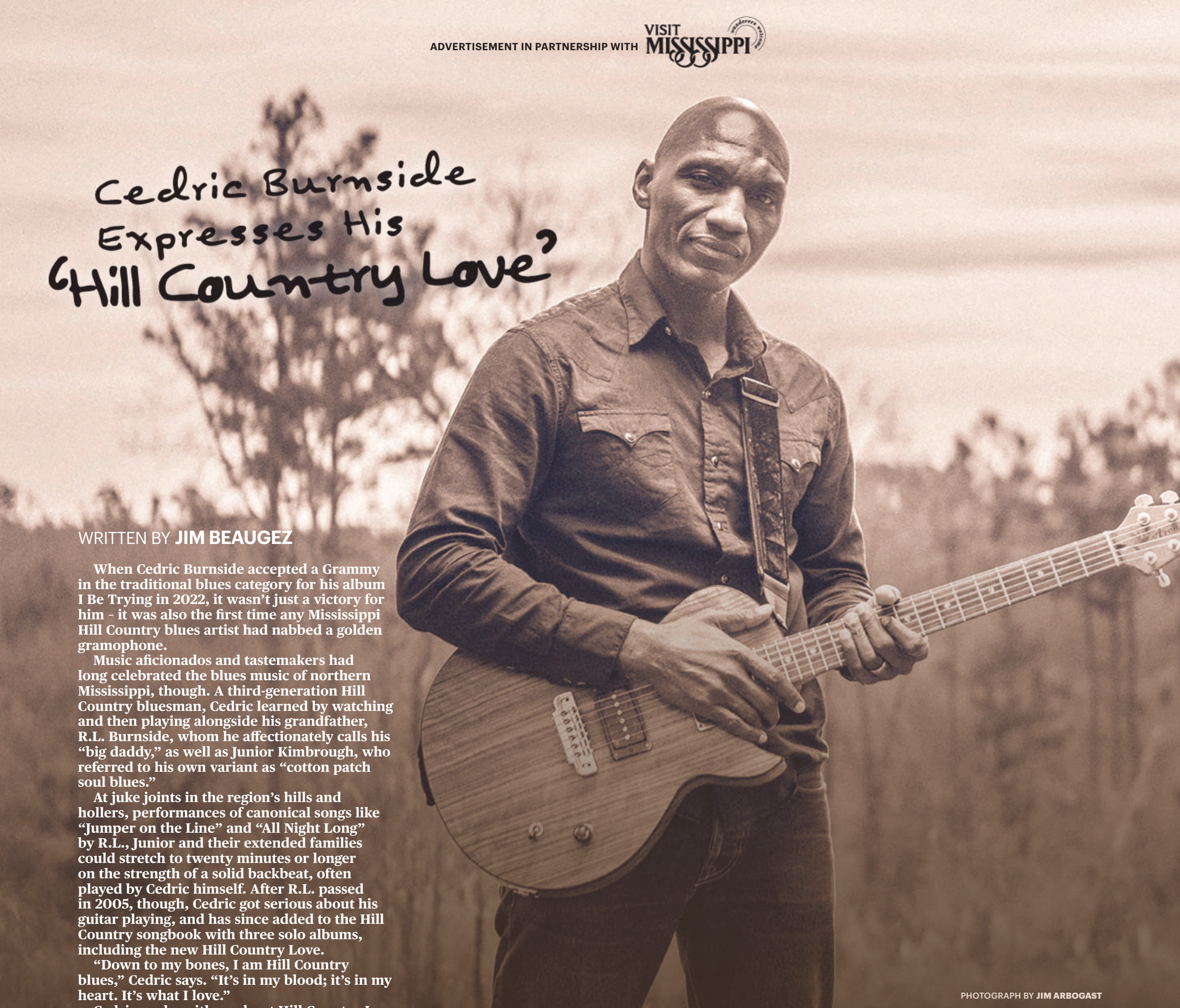
Cedric Burnside Expresses His 'Hill Country Love'



WRITTEN BY **JIM BEAUGEZ**

When Cedric Burnside accepted a Grammy in the traditional blues category for his album I Be Trying in 2022, it wasn't just a victory for him – it was also the first time any Mississippi Hill Country blues artist had nabbed a golden gramophone.

Music aficionados and tastemakers had long celebrated the blues music of northern Mississippi, though. A third-generation Hill Country bluesman, Cedric learned by watching and then playing alongside his grandfather, R.L. Burnside, whom he affectionately calls his "big daddy," as well as Junior Kimbrough, who referred to his own variant as "cotton patch soul blues."

At juke joints in the region's hills and hollers, performances of canonical songs like "Jumper on the Line" and "All Night Long" by R.L., Junior and their extended families could stretch to twenty minutes or longer on the strength of a solid backbeat, often played by Cedric himself. After R.L. passed in 2005, though, Cedric got serious about his guitar playing, and has since added to the Hill Country songbook with three solo albums, including the new Hill Country Love.

"Down to my bones, I am Hill Country blues," Cedric says. "It's in my blood; it's in my heart. It's what I love."

Cedric spoke with us about Hill Country Love and growing up at the feet of the masters.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **JIM ARBOGAST**

What does the title of your new album, 'Hill Country Love,' mean to you?

As a kid, I was one of many grandchildren listening at my big daddy [R.L. Burnside] and them play house parties. All the rest of the grandkids was kicking up dust dancing to the music, and I would dance some, but I was more in amazement of watching my big daddy and my dad [Calvin Jackson] play. It's always been something I can go to no matter what I'm feeling. "Hill Country Love" is where I express how I feel in my music and just taking it around the world, and just almost a thank-you to God.

It wasn't long until you got your turn to play music with them.

By the time I was 10 I played in juke joints, and I did my first tour with my big daddy at age 13. I was just determined. My uncle Garry Burnside was 12 years old, and he was pretty good on the bass at that age, and I played pretty good on the drums. They used to hide us behind the beer coolers when the police come into the juke joint, because if they sent us home [then] the band was gone, you know? When the police leave, we jump back on instruments and get the music going.

What did you learn about Hill Country blues from playing with them?

I grew up learning music from them and watching them, but it's just who I am. I'm not really trying to fill their shoes, because I think that's impossible, but I am trying to make my own way. And I think that's something they would love if they was here today, to watch me step up to the door they opened for me to keep this music going. Not that none of my other family is keeping the music going, because my uncle Duwayne Burnside, my uncle Garry Burnside, they still doing it. Cameron Kimbrough, he keeping the music going, as well. I was always inspired by my big daddy to just go for what I love, and Hill Country blues is what I love.

What do you think is the biggest misconception people have about the blues?

I think people look at blues as sad music. And not that there's not any sadness or depression in the blues, but people don't stay in [their] sadness, they don't stay in their depression. To me, blues is living to talk about it. Because if you stay in that state, I don't think you can really do anything. You don't have the strength to try to write music, you don't have the strength to try to come out of the situation.

How tied to a sense of place, and everything that goes with it, is your music?

Mississippi is everything to me. I've been to some of the most beautiful places in the world, but nothing makes me want to leave Mississippi. I just love the air of Mississippi, I love the trees of Mississippi, the land. It's a certain spiritual energy here to me. I can go outside and listen to the birds, and then I can write a song. I love it. And I think I'm gonna be here until I die. I'm gonna be buried here.

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Rolling Stone's partnership with Jack Daniel's is adding a bold new perspective to our *Musicians on Musicians* series. Through intimate panels and performances with Latin music stars, Jack Daniel's Presenta puts a spotlight on Latin music culture and creativity, amplifying its presence across the country as not a monolith, but a diverse tapestry of genres. • The artists profiled here might differ in style and approach, but each musician's work confirms the power that music and art have to enrich everyday life. They're showing that Latin music has the power to shape mainstream culture across the globe.

OVY ON THE DRUMS

"I SOLD MY FIRST BEAT for $8," remembers Colombian music producer Ovy on the Drums – a far cry from the blockbuster business he now conducts as a reggaeton phenom. The Grammy Award-winning mastermind behind monster hits like Karol G's "Tusa" and Paulo Londra's "Adan y Eva" is speaking from his cutting edge, exquisitely lit studio in Miami. He strolls effusively down memory lane, contrasting stories of 12-hour shifts at a produce market in Medellín against his achievements as a zeitgeist tastemaker and business owner.

"As a kid, I had no idea life would lead me into music," says the 33-year old Ovy, who was born Daniel Echavarría Oviedo and raised in Medellín's San Javier neighborhood. "I grew up in barrios, playing soccer. One day after a match, I went to my cousin's house and he told me his friend was going to teach me how to make music on Fruity Loops. I'd never even picked up an instrument. I knew nothing, but was very curious."

That curiosity soon turned into discipline, at one point creating up to 10 beats per day, which he then started selling to friends and local emerging artists. During this time, Ovy met a group of producers from San Andrés called La Compañía, who'd worked on club hits for Nicky Jam and a then-rookie J Balvin, and with their influence the 20-year old's focus quickly shifted from theory to banger-craft.

"After reggaeton from Panama and Puerto Rico became popular in Colombia in the early '00s, a new wave of artists and producers, including J Balvin, Shako El Sh, and Reykon started coming out of Medellín," he explains with all the authority of a riddim anthropologist. "The beats hit differently. It was just piano chords, a bass line, and a kick. Simplicity characterized Colombian reggaeton. But we also found ways of injecting our own culture."

In 2020, Ovy moved to Miami, where his label Big Ligas began signing and developing fresh talent such as Venezuelan rapper Micro TDH and Medellín R&B siren Bad Milk. Working with the label, the producer can fully realize his commitment to elevating rising stars. "It'll always be an honor to produce a song for a legend, but I'm most passionate about working with new blood," he adds.

The next name he hopes to blow up: Ovy on the Drums. The tireless producer is working on his long-awaited solo debut Dr. Drums, which is slated for release later in 2024. A string of recent singles teases a stacked guest list, including Peso Pluma on "El Hechizo," Ozuna on "Chao Bebe," and Bad Gyal and Ryan Castro on "Ghetto Princess." And while he also muses about wanting to delve deeper into the electronic universe, he sees no need to rush the process.

"The only concept I'm navigating is good music," he says. "This isn't an experimental record, but about bringing artists into my world."

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MYKE TOWERS

ANTOINE "NOEMAD" REID

MYKE TOWERS released a new album a few months ago, yet to no one's surprise, the Puerto Rican titan is already back in the studio. Towers is known to be prolific; his fourth studio album VIVE LA TUYA...NO LA MÍA was released in late November, but earlier in the year, he unveiled another full-length LP, La vida es una. The world of music moves quickly, he admits, and he is hungry to quench fans' thirst.

That incessant appetite is something he's possessed since his beginnings. Michael Anthony Torres Monge was born and raised alongside his siblings in a housing project in San Juan by his mother and grandmother. Like in any Spanish-speaking Caribbean home, salsa, merengue, and bachata seemed to play on a loop in the background.

Towers absorbed new music like a sponge, but he didn't record his own original songs until college. He pursued a degree in business administration at the University of Puerto Rico, working at a sneaker shop part-time. "I didn't have a life," he says. "I'd study, go to work, and when I had a little time at night, I'd dedicate myself to the studio." Two years into the program, he started skipping class altogether, holing up in the studio to write. That was when he realized it was time to follow his calling in earnest.

"Everyone feels like they can make whatever they want, but I'd say that each one of us should go back to our roots, our essence again."

Fast forward to 2019, when he scored smashes like "Dollar" with Becky G and "Si se da" with Farruko. The following year, he unleashed his debut album Easy Money Baby—the launchpad for a prosperous future at the top of the Spanish-language charts. Proven versatile, he returned to his roots on his 2021 follow-up, Lyke Myke, delivering effortless cascades of trap blustering. La vida es una, a 23-track colossus that further flaunted his creative flexibility and potential as a global star, arrived last year. That record luxuriates in irresistible hooks, breezy Afrobeats rhythms, and unabashed pop ambition. Its lead single, "Lala," hit No. 1 on Billboard's Latin Airplay chart.

There were a few left turns, too: Jersey club on "Disco Subterranea"; new jack swing on "Esa Nena"; merengue on "La Capi." "I really like to challenge myself," says Myke of these new adventures. "I like to go out a lot, to see people's reactions at the club and at parties...I'm always watching to see what works, what people like, and I take risks." But as much as he enjoys coloring outside the lines, Towers is a born hitmaker who knows that his music has to feel organic. The same can't be said for many stars, especially those who capitulate to trends or chase after buzzy collaborators for clout. "Everyone feels like they can make whatever they want, but I'd say that each one of us should go back to our roots, our essence again," he says of the industry's current landscape. "I feel that it's gone too far...Yes, we're all Latin music; we're united, but everyone has their roots."

Whether he's hopping on a spitfire dembow track or recording a pop-perreo chartbreaker, Towers is dead set on producing work that feels true to who he is, all while making bold artistic choices along the way. "You always have to play a new hand that surprises people," he says of his endless reinventions. Still, his first true love (hip-hop) isn't going anywhere. "You want to [rap] for those fans who started out with you—and to not forget where you came from," he concludes. "You always want to outdo yourself, but you can't forget those roots." ®

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ELENA ROSE

ELENA ROSE MAY BE THE pen behind some of Spanish-language pop's biggest hits, but after two minutes of conversation, it's easy to see that she is as authentic as they come. For one, her look is more laidback than you'd expect from a superstar songwriter: She dons a simple spaghetti strap tank top brandished with the words "I LOVE MEN," but the letter "n" is scratched out, so it reads "I LOVE ME." That level of self-comfort, confidence, and all-around grounded mindset also comes through in her work.

"Music was my refuge and my love language between my sisters and my mom," she explains on a video call from Medellín last December. "It was our way of disconnecting from reality," she continues. Every so often, she takes long drags from a cigarette as she narrates her tumultuous journey — one of dedicated hustle and resilience — in the music industry.

When she was 18, Rose moved to Miami with her then 16-year-old sister, leaving her mom and extended family behind in Caracas, Venezuela. She didn't have the faintest idea how the music industry worked, but she was adamant about setting out on her own. To pay the $1,000 rent on her apartment — a small space that originally functioned as an office — she waitressed at a restaurant and worked at a crystal shop.

At night, Rose would perform at bars with some of the industry's most in-demand touring musicians while they were taking a break from being on the road. One evening, a producer saw her singing at a bar and recruited her to sing on the demos he made for major label heavy hitters. Eventually, she asked the producer if she could shadow him during the songwriting process. It was in these sessions that she learned the basics of the business and trained to become a songwriter.

She embarked on a solo career in 2020, debuting with the singles "Sandunga," "Fenomenal," and "La Ducha." More singles arrived in the last three years, but it's only now that Rose is putting the final touches on her full-length debut. "I feel I've been writing this album my whole life," she says. She's composed over 60 songs for the LP, but it's been a challenge to narrow down the selection. There is a little bit of everything: dancehall, pop, ballads—although not much reggaeton, she admits with an apology and a laugh. She sees the release as a document of her transformation as an artist — a snapshot of the "transparency" she's brought to her life and creative practice.

Every producer, engineer, and songwriter she's worked with has contributed to the project in some way. "You have a song that is produced by one of Drake's biggest producers, but then you have another producer who I started out with," she goes on. "I see it and I'm like, 'Wow, this is different parts of me throughout the whole process.'"

"I don't want to be an unreachable artist. I want people to feel good. I want people to cry and feel safe that they can do it with me."

Rose doesn't fear vulnerability—perhaps because she's cultivated a meaningful relationship to alternative spirituality, manifestation, and intuition over the course of her life. In conversation, she calls herself a student of the universe and speaks about music as a divine endeavor. "I really want to walk in with God," she says of going into a writing session with another artist. "Because if not, I don't feel safe."

That desire for emotional sincerity and personal relatability is one of her secret weapons. Rose isn't worried about being brutally honest—especially if it means building a fanbase rooted in trust and authenticity, rather than detached glamour. "I don't want to be an unreachable artist," she explains. "I want people to feel good. I want people to cry and feel safe that they can do it with me."

RHETT WINSLOW

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LUIS R CONRIQUEZ

ANTOINE "NOEMAD" REID

AMIDST MÚSICA mexicana's pop crossover, Luis R. Conriquez conquered the industry with his corridos bélicos. Now he talks bold forays into EDM and dembow and empowering a new generation of Mexican songwriters.

"Growing up, music was my everything. If I didn't have my headphones in, I was probably blasting music directly from my cell phone," says singer and música mexicana savant Luis R. Conriquez, reminiscing from his home in Guadalajara. "I wrote my first songs in the shower, doing mental rewinds of my days working in supermarkets and gas stations. Oh yes, this whole thing started from the bottom."

Hailing from the city of Caborca, in the Mexican border state of Sonora, the 28-year old hit-maker and father-of-two speaks with the confident drawl of a cowboy who understands that bliss can be an ice-cold drink under the blistering desert sun. His first taste of fame came in 2019 with "El Búho," a gritty rags-to-riches tale echoing the exploits of classic narco-corridos while mirroring his own heroic leap from blue-collar hustle to decked-out opulence.

"In my mind, [bélico] relates to the instruments I use," reflects Conriquez. "That's the cannon fire of corridos bélicos. We experienced a brief censorship thing and I was careful for a while, but I also need to stay current and sing about what's happening on the street. It's what people want to hear, and I can't let anyone stop me."

"I want to conquer more places. You're lucky I don't sing in English because I'd take over that too."

Conriquez knows exactly how to rally his base, and ahead of the January release of his latest album, Corridos Bélicos IV, the Internet lit up following the reveal of a Sgt. Pepper's-esque cover stacked with genre juggernauts. From new school chart-toppers Fuerza Regida and Junior H, to long-time allies Gerardo Ortiz and Peso Pluma, and even a head-turning crossover with Colombian reggaeton dynamo Ryan Castro–the album delivered blockbuster fan service.

"Regional Mexican music is united, and that cover inspires confidence," he says poignantly. "When else have you seen all the superheroes together? Collaboration in music is a matter of inertia, of the heart, of friendship, and I hope to contribute something special and long-lasting to the culture. I've also opened songwriting opportunities to many young composers," he adds, noting his fruitful partnerships with Roberto Laija and Joel Portillo.

With his finger on the pulse and an eye on the horizon, Conriquez teases that more dembow is on the way. A deluxe edition of Corridos Tumbados IV is hitting streaming platforms later this year, with more guests joining the already biblical liner notes. He also remains an active partner in Kartel Music's A&R dealings, recruiting young talent and championing rising label stars Tony Aguirre and Los Novillos de la Sierra with buzzy features on his albums. Luis R. Conriquez understands that building a community is the key to expanding his empire, and every ally brings him one step closer to his humble dream of global domination.

"I want to go to Colombia and hear people singing my songs in a stadium," he says excitedly. "I know that's reggaeton country, but I think my music could really [pop off] there. I want to conquer more places. You're lucky I don't sing in English because I'd take over that too."

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DEVASTATION
The Calf Canyon/ Hermit's Peak Fire was the largest and most destructive in modern New Mexico history.

When the Government Sets the Fire

In New Mexico, recovery from the state's most destructive wildfire is complicated by high tensions between residents and the party responsible – the United States Forest Service

By COLLEEN HAGERTY

IT STARTED WITH smoke settling so thick over the highway that Roger Romero slowed his car to a crawl, no longer able to see others on the road. It was April 2022, and he was making his way down northern New Mexico, from Raton to Mora County, a remote region nestled along the Santa Fe National Forest and among the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Seven generations of his family called it home before him, the land sustaining them in life and holding them in death, a family plot part of the sweeping acres Romero owns. At first, the smoke didn't register as a real threat – just an inconvenient part of the drive. He was still miles from home, and fire, after all, is a part of the landscape in the West.

He kept going, following the curve of I-25, but then he came upon more gray clouds, now stretching up from familiar scenery. Wind-fed flames chewed across Hermit's Peak, a summit jutting out from the Sangre de Cristos. That's the moment everything changed: the realization his community was in danger.

Soon, the Sangres would be ablaze with flames gorging on the drought-dried landscape and skipping on the gusts of wind toward the towns below. When residents were later told to evacuate, some said the fire followed them, with pine cones turned into "kamikaze bombs" carried ablaze through the air. In the end, 341,735 acres were burned in what was named the Calf Canyon/ Hermit's Peak Fire, the largest and most destructive wildfire in modern New Mexico history. But those first curls of smoke Romero spotted weren't meant to be a threat – they were set on purpose in an effort to help the land, not destroy it.

The United States Forest Service annually treats around 3 million acres across the country with intentionally set fires known as prescribed burns. These deliberate ignitions are a key tool Indigenous tribes, firefighters, and ranchers have used for centuries

EDDIE MOORE/"ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL"/AP IMAGES

to cultivate healthier landscapes, the low-intensity licks of flames reducing overgrowth and forest-floor debris. They've become increasingly popular in recent years as a way to mitigate the rising risk of conflagrations due in part to the warmer, drier conditions climate change creates. What occurred in New Mexico is an extreme story of what happens when prescribed fire goes wrong.

Mora, San Miguel, and Taos – the three counties the wildfire touched – are among the oldest in the state, home to historic buildings that had survived hundreds of years before the blaze. In a matter of days, the fire reduced many of these to ash, destroying at least 160 homes and 900 other buildings. It wasn't all as easily quantifiable as buildings or cars – for some, it was food, stored to last through the season, or the promise of firewood to get them through the following winter. For many thousands, the impact is still ongoing, as they open their blinds each morning to a blackened landscape and end their evenings filling out yet another form. When fire gets out of control, it's not just the immediate area that can be affected; we saw that last year when New York City was blanketed in orange smoke from Canadian blazes.

The federal government pledged to cover 100 percent of the cost of debris removal and "emergency protective measures" following the fire in New Mexico. Congress approved a nearly $4 billion package to compensate victims for their losses, including their homes and other property.

President Joe Biden traveled to the state in June, promising to "fully compensate survivors for their total loss." "That is our responsibility. It's not a gift," he said in Santa Fe. "We will be here for you in response and recovery for as long as it takes."

During the monsoon season that followed, rains ravaged the region. When fires burn hot enough, soil can become "hydrophobic," one Forest Service employee tells me, meaning it can no longer absorb moisture; instead, water runs off it "like a tin roof." In New Mexico, the newly scorched soil slid down the mountains, forming new peaks and valleys, while the floods created their own waterways, swamped houses and cars, and rendered some roads impassable. While the fire itself was not deadly, the subsequent floods killed four people.

As generations of families like Romero's made the Sangre de Cristo Mountains communities their own, they passed down stories – truths and tall tales and combinations of the two. This was the real Wild West, frequented by famed gunslingers, one man tells me while pointing out into the distance, as if you could still see the men with their hands on their holsters off in the horizon. This is where a sadistic cult leader lived in a remote cabin, a local politician tells me.

Hermit's Peak itself draws its name from a legend of the past, that of Giovanni Maria de Agostini, an Italian monk who made the mountain his home in the 1860s and was believed to have healing powers. To appease those eager for his attention, Agostini struck a bargain with residents in the town below: He would regularly set a fire at the cliff's edge, a sign he was safe and well.

For Romero, seeing the smoke from Hermit's Peak signaled a new story, creating a before and after that will leave a legacy for centuries to come. What happened to Romero and his neighbors begins as a cautionary tale, that of the federal government coming to town and causing incalculable loss. But there's still the question of how this story ends – what will be done to make things right, and if the same mistakes can be prevented from happening again. The choices being made today in New Mexico will shape not only the land Romero's descendants inherit, but also create a precedent for the future of prescribed fires in this volatile era of climate change.

"He would have been the first of the ninth generation buried in our family cemetery," says Roger Romero, who couldn't bury his son there after the fire.

COURTESY OF ROGER ROMERO

BEFORE THE FIRE, there was a plan. A checklist. A crew. Contingency resources, just in case something went wrong.

In theory, the process for setting a prescribed fire is simple: Officials carry fuel-filled drip torches to the desired area and tilt them down, allowing a stream of flames to pour onto the earth, crackling as it reaches the ground and emitting a radiant orange heat. If the conditions are right, these flickers will ride a wave of wind a short distance before curling into themselves, smoldering to a stop. But an agency-approved burn is an exercise in bureaucracy, requiring a litany of oversight and sign-offs. The weather, the humidity, the wind speed and direction, the crew capacity and training, and a whole host of other factors play into whether a prescribed fire moves forward. Often, the decision to start the fire is made just hours before; then, on the ground, there's a test fire analyzed first to determine the final go-ahead.

It's a complex process, but officials from the highest levels of government have decided it's worth it for the good it can do. These planned ignitions offer the time-tested benefit of eliminating the particularly dry flora that would otherwise serve as an easy source of fuel for wildfires. A 2023 study from the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment found that low-intensity fires like prescribed burns can reduce the risk of catastrophic fire by about 60 percent for at least six years. This recent research builds on the knowledge Indigenous tribes have passed down since time immemorial. Their burns helped clean forest floors and encouraged new plant growth, creating a fire regime that supported healthy forests.

"We're utilizing it as a tool for our management purposes and regrowth," explains Sage Mountainflower, director of the Pueblo of Tesuque's Department of Environment and Natural Resources, of its approach to prescribed burning today. In 2019, her tribe partnered with the Forest Service and other federal and state agencies to conduct prescribed burns on their tribal land. She describes that first burn, set in Pacheco Canyon, as a "success story in all avenues," as the burned area was able to temper the spread of a lightning-strike fire the following summer.

These sorts of partnerships and the overall push for prescribed burning from the U.S. government is relatively new. During the 20th century, the Forest Service was staunchly against allowing any fire on the landscape, ordering all ignitions to be extinguished as quickly as possible and criminalizing cultural burning. Forests thickened, with the lack of fire allowing more growths, seeds, branches, and leaves to accumulate. At the same time, extractive land-use practices like ranching and timber harvesting led to overgrazing and the loss of large, historic trees, which can be more resistant to high-severity fires, according to Matthew Hurteau, a forest ecologist and biology professor at the University of New Mexico. With the threat of wildfire reduced, communities started to sprawl farther outside of cities. Today, nearly 99 million people in the U.S. – close to one-third of the country's population – live in areas known as the wildland-urban interface, in which neighborhoods border undeveloped land.

There are many factors that weigh into the creation of a deadly wildfire, but these choices, made over decades, are all recognized to have contributed to our current predicament. Combine crowded, overgrown, and developed lands with the hotter, drier climate, and the potential for wildfire spikes – all of that buildup ready to burn. And it is, with one recent congressional estimate placing the annual economic damages due to wildfires between $394 billion and $893 billion. Recent years have also seen some of the deadliest wildfires in modern U.S. history occur in California and Hawaii. Of the 10 deadliest fires on record, four have happened within the past six years, the rest about a century or more earlier.

"There's no future for us that excludes fire – these landscapes are primed to burn, they evolved with fire, [and] climate change is making them more flammable," Hurteau says. "So we have to figure out how to live with fire, and we need to do that in a way in which we're using fire to achieve the landscape objectives."

The Forest Service committed to doing just that, releasing a strategy in 2022 that called for burning an additional 20 million acres over the next decade. That plan included identifying 10 landscapes to focus on. Northern New Mexico was on the list, red splotches drawn over the Santa Fe National Forest to acknowledge its high risk of fire. Less than four months later, the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak Fire was blooming within those borders.

THE MORNING OF April 6, 2022, was considered to be "in prescription," meaning it checked the many literal

boxes of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's "Go/No Go Checklist" for deciding whether or not a prescribed burn should be conducted. This decision ultimately falls on the shoulders of a burn boss, who receives special certification to devise burn plans and call the shots once the fire is set. In this case, the burn boss in charge (whose name has not yet been publicly released) decided to move forward. The community in the surrounding area would have received little notice beyond a press release, according to Shaun Sanchez, who took on the role of supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest following the wildfire.

According to a review of the day the Forest Service later published, the prescribed-fire crew arrived at the Santa Fe National Forest and split in two, an Alpha team and a Bravo team, to cover different sections of the planned burning plot. At 11:34 a.m., members of the Bravo team pointed their drip torches toward the dry soil, laying a hot line of flames onto the earth. This test fire was done in an area with less "fuel," meaning there weren't many plants or debris to speed its spread. The movement was carefully monitored, from the way it fanned out as it consumed pine needles to the light color of the smoke it puffed into the air.

At this point, everything seemed to be progressing as planned. At 12:34 p.m. the burn boss declared it a success, a message relayed back to the Forest Service dispatch center. Then the two teams walked with their torches tipped down, as they highlighted the mountain with new strips of fire.

The problems began on the Bravo side. Spot fires occur when embers and flickers from the purposefully set flames scatter and ignite elsewhere. The wind grew stronger as the afternoon went on. By 4:06 p.m., both teams were chasing about a dozen spots across the forest, trying to stop them from spreading as they found new crisp leaves and grasses for fuel. The errant ignitions merged, forming a blazing-hot united front, moving fast toward Hermit's Peak.

At 4:34 p.m., the burn boss reached out to the dispatch center once again, this time to request the agency administrator on the phone. They believed it was time to recategorize the activity from a prescribed fire to a wildfire. The focus was no longer setting a fire but containing it.

Later that week, officials detected another smoldering start, deeper in the forest. It was at the site of another planned ignition, this one considered a finished job from back in January 2022. A crew had gathered up some of that forest-floor debris, piled it tall, and then cast the flames onto it. This aptly named tactic of pile burning is quick and efficient, often done in the winter, when the risk for a spread is lower due to the cool, damp conditions. But this pile was never properly extinguished, the embers holding onto their glow in a silent smolder for months.

When the hot, dry air blew through the forest in April, it was enough to reignite the fire, an improbable sounding but not uncommon occurrence known as a holdover or zombie fire. More recently, a series of zombie fires have been spotted in British Columbia this winter, holdovers from Canada's historic 2023 fire season, which saw more than 45 million acres ignite.

The Calf Canyon fire grew steadily, becoming a wildfire in its own right on April 19. Three days later, a particularly gusty day carried the Calf Canyon fire eastward, where it met the flames from Hermit's Peak. On April 22, the two wildfires merged, moving as one toward the nearby towns.

Joey Romero, the undersheriff of Mora County, helped evacuate residents. At first, it was chaos, he remembers – the mix of officials coming in from all across the state, with the Forest Service and National Guard and State Police all trying to pitch in. Soon, the area lost power, and a sort of surreal silence set in. He likened the experience to the 1980s dystopian war film *Red Dawn,* of being the only front left to face off against a fierce invader.

"Just seeing that crown, the fire coming over the mountain, it was one of those things you don't ever think you're going to experience," he says.

The merged, massive wildfire ultimately took the Forest Service more than four months to contain.

THE FOREST SERVICE website states that 99.84 percent of prescribed burns are carried out within their planned boundaries. That means there are less than two escapes, or fires that stray beyond those set perimeters, out of every 1,000 it lights. As the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak wildfire burned, Forest Service chief Randy Moore announced the agency was instituting a 90-day pause in prescribed burning across the country in order to review prescribed-burn "protocols, decision support tools, and practices."

Forest Service officials and outside experts pored over the April 6 plans, revisiting the conditions, communications, and minute-by-minute logs of the morning's activities to put together their analysis. It identifies a number of mistakes. Officials failed to account for the impacts of climate change, the report claims, including just how dry conditions have become after years of historic drought in the region.

The issues went beyond that significant underestimation. There was a lack of adequate documentation at the start, communication breakdowns in the field, and insufficient contingency resources for suppression. The review notes that "district fire employees perceived pressure to 'accomplish the mission,' which may have led to taking greater risk."

THE FIRES WERE JUST THE BEGINNING
After the prescribed burn spread, the scorched earth lead to flooding, as the soil became "hydrophobic," meaning it could not hold moisture. The subsequent floods lead to four deaths.

FROM TOP: EDDIE MOORE/"ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL"/ZUMA PRESS, 2; KEVIN MOHATT/REUTERS/REDUX

The authors use the term "error" to describe some of the issues, like the modeling mistakes. Stronger, often accusatory language is more popular among locals who will tell you they knew the conditions were wrong that windy morning. Michael Stuart Ani is one of them. A transplant to the area from Northern California, Ani and his wife, Heather Vuchinich, moved to San Miguel County in part to escape the fires that had forced them to evacuate multiple times. They now live at an address Google Maps gets wrong, down a series of dirt roads where the quirks of their neighbor's homes – flags, signs, and paint colors – serve as landmarks in the directions Vuchinich sends me.

After I pass inspection from their two boisterous dogs, the couple welcome me into the adobe-style dwelling, their walls lined with photos from past travels. In his early seventies, dressed in a cowboy hat and buckled blue jeans, Ani cuts a classic Western figure, while Vuchinich, 54, is dressed casually, offering me tea and a few soft smiles, though concern lingers in her eyes. The fire spared their house, but a black line a few feet away from it in the backyard indicates just how lucky they were. The flames swallowed a historic bunkhouse on the wrong side of that divide.

There's a pervasive anger about the situation throughout the burn scar, Ani explains, but the roots of the resentment begin in different soils for different residents. Ani speaks of the "computers" and "models" the Forest Service used to track fire behavior with air quotes; he believes the agency was too busy looking at screens to see what was happening in front of it, or to listen to what locals with deep knowledge of the region were saying.

"You came in and burned us out. You came with arrogance and destroyed our lives," Ani says, hitting the table in front of him for emphasis. "That's the crux of the whole problem here: You need to show us respect."

Vuchinich is quieter and careful with her words, sending me articles and government reports to support her statements before and after we meet. Her distrust of the federal government stems from the fact that federal officials have made this sort of mistake in New Mexico before – not too long ago, really. In May 2000, National Park Service employees set a prescribed burn in a wooded area of Bandelier National Monument on the western side of the Santa Fe National Forest. It turned into a wildfire that destroyed 200 residential structures in the nearby city of Los Alamos. Much like the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak aftermath, a rush of federal reports followed, identifying issues and outlining ways to prevent them next time.

Seeing similarities between the two responses has left Vuchinich skeptical that anything will change to prevent the next fire. Why should the federal government be trusted to do things differently after making the same mistake twice, she wants to ask, and why aren't residents being given more of an opportunity to voice their concerns about their own land? She's brought these questions with her to town halls and meetings hosted by federal agencies, by lawyers, and by local officials. There's a cadence to these meetings though – the bulk of the time dedicated to presentations, with questions squeezed in at the end. Often, officials encourage those with concerns to connect with them after the meeting one-on-one, or promise they'll get back to them at a later date.

"You can't ever make people whole, you can't replace 100-year-old trees, at least not in our lifetime," says Mora County Commissioner Veronica Serna about the wildfire's aftermath.

"The message seems to be that the government really doesn't care that much about what people think about how it should be restored," Vuchinich says. "Whether or not that's true, that's what's coming through."

Distrust of the federal government and the Forest Service in particular stretches back more than a century here. In the 2015 book *Enchantment and Exploitation,* William deBuys offers a sweeping history of the region, including detailing the long-standing tensions between locals and Forest Service employees, who he described as having "two radically different perceptions of the land." For locals, the land was their source of all sustenance, and tending to it was often a birthright. For the Forest Service, there were directives to follow to maintain federal property, even if they clashed with the locals' understanding of the terrain.

DeBuys quotes one villager describing his interactions with the Forest Service in 1980: "Every time a new guy comes in, we have to fight his ideas. He may have a college degree, but we know the country. I've known it since I was a boy, and my boy, when he is my age, will know it as well as me."

For many of the fire's victims, their main interactions with the federal government have not been with the Forest Service directly, but rather through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is coordinating the distribution of the congressionally appropriated funds. FEMA set up two offices in the impacted counties to coordinate these applications, hiring local residents they trained to serve as "claims navigators" to walk neighbors through their options. One of the navigators, Yvette Arellanes, tells me she took the job to help others have a better experience with FEMA than she initially did.

As of this past February, FEMA reported doling out 1,586 payments to the sum of $405 million from the fund, which an agency spokesperson says covers more than half the claims with documentation it has received. Of those, 1,525 were to individuals, households, and family trusts. The following month, FEMA announced that the director of the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak claims office, Angela Gladwell, was being reassigned within the agency as the office transitions into focusing "from development to effective delivery at the local level."

Gladwell has a long résumé in the disaster-recovery space, but she found the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak Fire process to be a "unique circumstance," due to the federal government's responsibility in causing the disaster.

Speaking to me in November, she acknowledged the slow pace of disbursement so far, and urged residents to continue registering with the agency and to be patient. But it's not just the speed residents have taken issue with – FEMA is also being sued by some of the fire's victims over its interpretation of the recovery legislation and what the agency is choosing to reimburse. Plaintiffs are fighting to receive "noneconomic damages," which includes compensation for homeowners who cannot present proper paperwork, something fairly common in a place where ownership was often passed down rather than written down. A representative of FEMA tells me the agency is not commenting on any pending litigation.

Tucked away in the United Methodist Church in Las Vegas, the largest city impacted by the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak Fire, a church- and small-donor-funded, resident-led group, Neighbors Helping Neighbors Fire Relief, has been coordinating aid for fire survivors. Founder Janna Lopez says it has assisted more than 400 clients, including acting as a liaison between government officials and residents. In her opinion, the government outreach to residents has equated to "a lot of lip service." When I ask her why someone would go to Neighbors Helping Neighbors rather than working directly with FEMA, Lopez's answer is quick and biting.

"We treat people like humans," she says. "Like your grandmother or brother or sister, a neighbor, your child."

"And they treat them like number 41-63572," chimes in another volunteer, sitting at a desk across the room, who asks not to be named.

IN A WAY, the federal government has set itself up to fail, Veronica Serna believes. The Mora County commissioner has become one of the most vocal advocates for those impacted by the fire, even testifying in front of Congress last year. She's become known in the area for her post-fire tours, taking agency officials, politicians, and the occasional journalist on hourslong drives through the impacted region, visiting homeowners and recovery projects and a local diner, because she knows you'll get hungry along the way. My tour takes place on an unseasonably cold fall day, a dusting of snow softening the blackened scenery around us.

Her issue is with the promise to "fully compensate" survivors – that's just impossible, she says.

"You can't ever make people whole, you can't replace 100-year-old trees, at least not in our lifetime," she tells me, her dark eyes set on the road ahead.

Today, Serna is just trying to find a way forward. A big part of that has been trying to help residents feel heard and act as a matchmaker of sorts between those in need and those with resources. On our first stop of the day, I meet Kathryn Uehlein, whose mountainside home burned down during the fire, along with the garden she used to grow vegetables. She now lives in an RV with a small wood-burning stove inside.

Serna convenes a small group to join me on our drive, a mix of state and federal officials working on the recovery efforts. She introduces us to locals, business owners, researchers, and the county deputy sheriff. I meet Army Corps officer Robert Zebrowski, one of the officials deployed to help lead flood mitigation efforts in areas washed out from the monsoon roads. [*Cont. on 81*]

VERSACE

peso pluma takes on the world

He shot out of Mexico to become the biggest new artist on the planet. Now, can he navigate a unique kind of stardom?

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTAVO SORIANO

THE STREETS leading up to the Lab Studios, a recording complex in Miami's lush Coconut Grove neighborhood, are full of bright, iridescent peacocks. Peso Pluma has set up a weeklong writing camp here in late January to work on his new album, which, he reveals later, is called *Exodo* and will be out this summer. It's almost too fitting that a bunch of decadent birds with stately, metallic feathers are sashaying down the pavement. After all, the Mexican artist, whose real name is Hassan Emilio Kabande Laija, has blasted to global stardom by writing about things like heartbreak and romance – but his swaggering, streetwise songs about high-luxe, extravagant living are among his most popular. Today, he's about to make a few more.

Through the doors, the studio feels like a tropical frat house, packed with polite, laid-back guys who might pass for regular twentysomethings, except that many of them are casually wearing diamond-dripped watches and gold chains heavy enough to cause neck injuries. Most are Peso's bandmates – young but seasoned musicians who play bass, double bass, guitar, *requinto* (a smaller kind of guitar), trombone, and *charchetas* (alto horns), all instruments that define Peso's particular brand of corridos tumbados.

Corridos tumbados are a strikingly modern version of corridos, folksy, narrative-driven ballads that have told some of Mexico's most epic stories and reflected complex realities for more than 200 years. Traditional corridos – which play a big role in música Mexicana, an umbrella term used to describe the many different genres within Mexican music – are often seen as old-school, honky-tonk soundtracks for grandparents. That changed in a big way around the mid-2010s, when a bunch of kids, including the then-17-year-old Natanael Cano, brought out their sharpest, prickliest guitars and started borrowing influences from trap and other forms of hip-hop. The result shaped the music for a hyper-online, genre-agnostic generation.

Peso followed shortly, and shot out of the pack, a skinny kid whose stage name literally means "featherweight." Over the past few years, he's added his own energetic style to the movement: His songs have emphasized chunky trombone lines and intricate guitar arrangements that set the stage for his spiky vocals – though he quickly showed he could go beyond this sound and slide into any style of music, from pop to reggaeton.

Deputy music editor JULYSSA LOPEZ *wrote about Anitta in the March issue.*

Right now, at the Lab Studios, his band is crowded into one of the recording rooms, listening to an early version of what could become his latest hit. Peso isn't there as a maelstrom of opening brass notes charge out of the sound system. But within a few minutes, an unmistakable rasp, full of grain and grist, calls out "Hola!" It's more of an announcement than a greeting, unique and barbed enough to tear a hole in the space-time continuum. Peso bounces in cheerfully, wearing a white T-shirt and blue basketball shorts, a black backward cap covering his signature mullet. He eyes his producer's computer and nods along to the track for a bit. Then, in a flash, he's gone.

For the next few hours, Peso bobs around like a ball of electricity, bursting into different rooms and jumping onto different songs. When I find him a little while later, he's thrashing away on a guitar, demonstrating an idea to some of the best songwriters in all of música Mexicana. There's Edgar Barrera, the 33-year-old producer and songwriter who was nominated for 22 Latin Grammys in the past two years alone. Nearby is Alexis "El Chachito" Fierro, a witty, jovial writer who helped Peso with "Lady Gaga," a supersmash he recorded with Mexican newcomers Gabito Ballesteros and Junior H, full of lyrics about champagne-topped excesses.

Peso has finished most of a corrido that he wrote on his own, but he wants to develop it a little more. "Maybe we can add a pre-chorus or something," he suggests, fiddling with the guitar. He sings what he has so far, and his voice, in all of its rich peculiarity, fills the space. His tone is so unvarnished and raw, it can be either grating or captivating, depending on the listener. Overwhelmingly, people are drawn to it. "It doesn't sound like any other voice in the industry," Barrera says. "When you hear him, you know immediately that it's Peso Pluma singing."

That voice was everywhere last year. In March, he joined forces with the Mexican American band Eslabon Armado for "Ella Baila Sola," a googly-eyed ode to a pretty girl on the dance floor that became the first música Mexicana song to reach Number One on Spotify's Global chart and to crack the Top 10 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 (ROLLING STONE named it the best song of 2023). At one point on the track, Peso bleats out "Bella!" with such force that it spawned TikTok challenges and tons of impersonations. Next was "Bzrp Music Sessions Vol. 55," part of a popular YouTube freestyle-type series, which scored Peso a second Number One on Spotify's Global chart. Then *Génesis,* his breakthrough album, debuted at Number Three on the *Billboard* 200 in April – the highest-charting regional Mexican album ever.

A bunch of wild milestones followed: In September 2023, Peso and his bandmates became the first música Mexicana act to perform at the VMAs. He beat out Taylor Swift, Bad Bunny, and everybody else in the world to become the year's most-viewed artist on YouTube. He ducked in and out of studios with some of his rap heroes – A$AP Rocky and Travis Scott, among them. And then, in February, he won his first Grammy, taking home a trophy for Best Música Mexicana Album, capping the night with a couple of photos alongside Jay-Z. In between, there have been billions of streams, collaborations with everyone from Becky G to Anitta to Kali Uchis, and sold-out stadiums across the whole of the planet.

Part of the appeal is that, unlike many música Mexicana artists of the past, Peso traded cowboy boots and sombreros for high-end sneakers and baseball caps, looking more like an iced-out rapper than a Mexican crooner. Add an idiosyncratic Eighties-style mullet, one so distinct that kids in Mexico have started asking for the Peso Pluma haircut, and you have the most daring ambassador of corridos tumbados, rewriting the genre's rules. "I'm proud to wave my flag up high and to be the first to do a lot of things – to be able to show my roots and where we're from and what we like to listen to and what we do," Peso says.

His live performances are a big part of the draw, too. Onstage, Peso is hyperactive, unconstrained, explosive: He'll stomp his feet and jump up and down, scrunching up his face into impish expressions that fans have immortalized through memes and GIFs. "The first time I saw him perform, on a stage, even in a practice, I was blown away by the charisma that he had," his manager, George Prajin, tells me. "I always told everybody, 'This is the Mexican Mick Jagger.' "

CORRIDOS HAVE HAD a long, complicated, and controversial history. Since the Mexican Revolution, these ballads have narrated bloody, violent battles and laid out tales of corruption and poverty. Their genealogical tree includes narcocorridos, a subgenre that emerged in the Sixties and rose in the Eighties, filled with unflinching stories about Mexico's drug trade. Younger corridos tumbados artists haven't shied away from some of these traditions, a little like blending Johnny Cash with N.W.A. Like many corrido singers before them, they've drawn scrutiny, even anger, accused of glorifying guns, violence, and the gruesome realities of the drug war.

Peso often sings about impressing girls with flashy cars and packing diamond-studded guns to ward off haters, but some of his earlier collaborations have name-checked cartels and shadowy figures in the northwestern state of Sinaloa. Those lyrics have led to not just criticism but threats as well: Last fall, ahead of his concert in Tijuana, several banners appeared throughout the city: "This is for you, Peso Pluma. Don't show up on Oct. 14 because it will be your last performance." They were signed by the Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación, a rival to the Sinaloa Cartel, seemingly angry at the shout-outs in Peso's music.

His team canceled the show and kept moving, continuing his tour in other parts of the world. But the pace and the pressure is undeniably intense, particularly for an artist carving out a tricky, polarizing path that has never quite existed before. Despite the fact that Mexico shares a border with the U.S., few Mexican artists – much less ones making música Mexicana – have blown up in the pop mainstream this way. (From Ritchie Valens to Selena, many major crossover stars typically associated with Mexican sounds have been born in the U.S.) Where Peso goes next is uncharted territory.

"I'm grateful to my people and to fans who supported me because they're the ones that have put us on the charts and everything else," he explains.

PREVIOUS AND LAST SPREADS: OUTFIT BY VERSACE. EYEWEAR BY CARTIER. EARRING BY CHROME HEARTS (WORN THROUGHOUT). GLOVES BY WING + WEFT GLOVES. THIS SPREAD: OUTFIT BY LU'U DAN. EYEWEAR BY GENTLE MONSTER. BRACELETS BY CARTIER AND TIFFANY & CO.

“I’m proud to wave my flag up high and to be the first to do a lot of things — to be able to show my roots and where we’re from and what we do.”

"But I don't see this as a competition or about position or about places we've reached. I think it's not just Peso Pluma that reached Number One – it's Mexican music that made this happen."

It's easy to forget that Peso is only 24 – and though his straight shot to fame took a lot of work, it happened fast. He has a lot to balance, and there are points when we meet over the course of a month that he seems exhausted by everything. He can be quiet and taciturn, almost drained by the sheer act of talking. Other times, like at the Lab Studios, he's upbeat, delighting in the euphoria of creating something entirely new, of making songs no one has imagined before.

Peso joins his band in the recording room to check out the progress of the horn-filled song. The creative process is testament to the intricacy of recording música Mexicana: No one is making a beat on a computer or synthesizer. Instead, each member of the seven-piece band perfects complex arrangements for every track, then records their part individually. Some songs are labored over for days and don't even make the album. For *Génesis*, Peso tells me, he recorded about 40 songs and used 17. Still, he seems happy with this one: He breaks into a wiry little dance fans might recognize, throwing his arms into the air.

He makes his way back to the songwriters room. On his way, he asks Valeria Murrillo, who does artist relations and management, if she can bring tequila and shot glasses to the room. Then he sits, going line by line, working enthusiastically on the corrido he'd played them earlier. Barrera says later that the studio time with Peso felt special: "I've never been in a writing camp where the energy was so, so, so high."

"The delivery is here," Murrillo announces after a while, walking in with a hand-painted bottle of Clase Azul tequila. The room fills with cheers as the bottle is sloshed around, tequila spilling out of shot glasses. Someone asks me if I want one, and I politely turn it down. Peso whips around with a giant grin on his face and points at me.

"*Siiii,* ROLLING STONE," he singsongs in his signature croon. In seconds, I have a glass in my hand.

Then Peso stands up in the middle of the room and starts to speak. "Tonight, we're making history with two songs that are really epic," he says. "Thanks to my *compa* Chachito, my *compa* Oscar, who are here. To Julia, to everyone who's part of this album – Ivan, Edgar. You guys know. Thanks to everyone, *hay que echerle chingasos*." Roughly translated, it means, "Let's kick some ass."

Everyone lifts up their drink. "*Salud!*"

"What was the dead guy missing?" Fierro yells.

"*Salud!*" everyone repeats gleefully. The tequila goes down burning, and a few people clear their throats with a united "*Ahh!*"

"This is a Covid cure," Fierro cracks, and Peso looks at me for a second, his eyes dancing.

" 'They drank a Covid cure,' " he jokes, narrating what he thinks I'll write in the story. "Which means 'tequila shot.' "

The musicians crack up, and within seconds, they've thrown themselves back into the new song, which is suddenly faster, more celebratory, and more animated than it was earlier. The guitars sound more powerful, and Peso's voice rings out loudest, his enthusiasm palpable.

By 10 p.m., the neighborhood peacocks are probably curled in the trees, fast asleep. But the studio lights are on, and the entire building is practically quaking from the exuberant blast of horns that keeps going on and on.

THE NEXT DAY, Peso is sitting at a table outside of the studio, staring at his phone, bleary-eyed. The energy is a little more lethargic than the day before, probably because the guys didn't go home until 2 a.m. Peso lists everywhere he has to go next: New York, Mexico, L.A. (he lives in Orange County). He has a tour announcement to plan, a bunch of awards-show appearances, plus the album, which he's been trying to get done whenever he can. "Wherever I keep going, I keep advancing it little by little," he says. It's a reminder of how much is on his shoulders, and how much he has to get done.

Elsewhere, the space has been replenished with more talent: Tito "Double P" Laija, Hassan's cousin and one of his closest confidants, is nearby, already brainstorming a new song. He's quiet and serious, sitting with the rest of the guys to come up with lyrics.

Funny enough, Peso didn't actually know Tito very well growing up. Tito was born in Culiacán, Peso in Guadalajara. Peso describes himself as an active kid with a short attention span, obsessed with soccer and Spider-Man. His mom, a makeup artist, was often working, so he would stay home a lot, eventually teaching himself to play guitar by watching YouTube tutorials. He loved artists like Chalino Sanchez, the "King of Corridos" and rumored cartel hitman, whose gritty ballads made him an enduring star before he was assassinated after a concert in Mexico at age 31. Peso was also a fan of Ariel Camacho, the Mexican singer who'd started gaining traction in the U.S. before his career was cut short in a fatal car accident in 2015.

"I was doing [music] more to earn a buck because that's how I'd eat," Peso says of his early days as a singer-songwriter. "I didn't have another job."

As a teenager, Peso spent time in the U.S., briefly attending high school in Texas. He was always into hip-hop and idolized rappers like Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls (he has an "All Eyez on Me" tattoo on his chest in homage to 'Pac). All of those influences filtered into songs he started writing and would play for friends at parties. "I never had a teacher for guitar or for singing. The only teachers I can call teachers were my friends. Basically we'd get together and drink and sing as friends to have a good time," he says. "It was more doing covers, but I started developing. That's how I found my style, my voice – playing with friends."

Around the time he turned 20, he decided to move to Culiacán, in northwest Mexico, by himself to make it as a musician. He played a lot of private parties and wrote his own songs. Through a few shared acquaintances, he came across Tito, who'd also become a musician and a songwriter. "We started talking more about how we're cousins and 'How's the family?' and all that shit, and how cool it was that we were both making music," Peso says. "He was doing it more as a hobby, and I was doing it more to earn a buck because that's how I'd eat. I didn't have another job."

Working with Tito unlocked something. "When I met Tito, that was the musical support I was missing, and we started talking about doing something together," Peso remembers. It took several months, but eventually, Tito sent him about 30 songs through Voice Notes. One of them was "El Belicon," which translates to "The Fighter" or "The Belligerent One." Peso responded to it immediately. The song's guitar melodies are pretty mellow. In the lyrics, however, Peso and featured artist Raul Vega flaunt their collection of "*minimis, basukas, y Kalashnikovs,*" or "machine guns, bazookas, and Kalashnikov rifles." The video takes it further, showing them running around with masks and rifles. "El Belicon" took off locally, then ballooned even bigger, becoming Peso's first song to land on *Billboard*'s Hot Latin Songs and going eight-times platinum. It was a turning point. "When we made that song, that's when I saw that his style with my style was the key to get us noticed," Peso says.

The cousins caught the attention of a manager named Herminio Morales, though after he fell ill for some time, he asked Prajin to take on Peso. Prajin jumped on the opportunity, but not without fully evaluating the scope of Peso's abilities first. "I've been doing this for a long time, [managing] athletes, artists. I had my kind of insecurities about working with another artist and putting everything into them. So, you know, I tested him a little bit." Prajin had Peso learn Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" on guitar and record it in English. "I saw that he trusted me. And when I saw that, I said, 'I'm going all in with this kid,' " Prajin says. (People are still urging him to release the cover, but Prajin says he promised Peso he could make that call.)

Peso and Prajin saw the way reggaeton stars had achieved critical mass by teaming up and releasing major collaborations. Peso started recording with virtually everyone, releasing song after song: "PRC" with Cano, "La Bebe" with Yng Lvcas, "Igualito a Mi Apá" with Fuerza Regida, "Chanel" with Becky G.

In no small part because of these efforts, música Mexicana exploded. It fits into the larger story of Latin music, which generated $1 billion in 2022 and has continued outpacing the rest of the music industry. Música Mexicana has spurred its own growth: On Spotify, streams have more than tripled since 2019, and five of the genre's artists made Spotify's Top 50 global artists. Leading the charge was Peso, whom people streamed 9 billion times in 2023 alone. Corridos tumbados artists have started appearing on the major festival circuit; Cano played Coachella in 2022, and after a surprise cameo during Becky G's set last year, Peso has an afternoon slot this year.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: OUTFIT BY LOUIS VUITTON. NECKLACES BY VENEDA CARTER. THIS SPREAD: TRENCH COAT BY LU'U DAN.

Still, the genre's associations with drugs and violence have been tough to shake. Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, publicly denounced corridos tumbados, and in November, authorities in Tijuana cracked down on narcocorridos, issuing a ban that affects corridos tumbados as well. The new law says that any artist who "transmits, exhibits, sings, or reproduces music, videos, images, or any other similar thing that promotes the culture of violence or makes apologies for crime or for the authors of illegal acts in a live performance" could be subject to fines of up to $57,000.

But many of the songwriters in the genre see it as just another form of storytelling. "You can't censor it, because how do you censor what's happening?" Barrera says. "You're going to see it on the news, which talks about this every day. Corridos have always been about storytelling and what's happening on the streets."

Prajin often compares the genre to hip-hop, which was also reviled by many when it was reaching the mainstream. "The reality is that they're entertainers, right? And they're singing songs, and their songs mirror what people live on a daily basis. There's good things in the world and there's bad things in the world," Prajin says. "All Hassan does is, he's an interpreter."

If you ask Peso, his music is just a mix of real-life experiences and what he's feeling. "It's a blend of stuff that occurs to me, what comes to my mind and what I want to capture. I've always said that music works for me as a kind of therapy. It's a lot of stuff that people don't talk about. They only see the tip of the iceberg of what someone feels," he says.

Still, the criticism does seem to weigh on Peso. He's already thinking about *Exodo* as more of a direct response to the negative press that seems to surround him. "[On *Génesis*] people already saw the good side, the superhero side. But I think this year, they're going to know a darker side," he tells me cryptically. "There's going to be a lot of things about why we do what we do, and why we sing what we do, why people pit us against each other, why media always look for bad things, why people focus more on the negatives than the positives."

I ask him why he thinks people focus on the negative side of his career. "I don't know," he says with a shrug. "I think it's 10 times more convenient for the media to have bad news than good news. People talk more about the bad stuff than the good stuff." Has he learned to block it out? "No, it's not easy, but I think day to day, I'm learning to not give a shit about everything, you know? And to just do what I like. If they like it, good. And if they don't like it, again, good."

Back at the Lab Studios in Miami, everyone is hard at work. Peso has been directing the whole show, but for a few minutes, he lingers outside, hanging out with his bandmates, smoking a joint.

A few minutes later, his tour manager comes up to him and shares that two reggaeton producers have arrived at the studio to show him a few tracks. Peso gets up and makes his way into a side studio to meet them. About half an hour later, they're blasting some of a track they've just created, with Peso's voice front and center. Some of his bandmates waiting outside the room nod along. About an hour or two later, the producers leave and Peso ambles out of the room, like he didn't just make a new song. Even so, there's way more to do, more corridos to write.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, in late January, Peso is back in California. He's just arrived at Prajin's studio in Anaheim, and greets his manager quickly. He shows him a video that he's about to post on Instagram, one he took driving down a freeway in new sneakers. Prajin looks it over carefully, making sure nothing in it – including the speed limit, visible in one frame – will get Peso in trouble.

Prajin and Peso have an airtight relationship. Prajin tells me he sees Peso as a son, while Peso often talks about his endless appreciation for his manager. "Thank God I fell into good hands in this industry," he says. "George is a good man, a businessman, and it's not because of the work relationship we have, but because he wants the best for me and takes care of me above everything."

"I'm crazy. And I'm not saying that as a joke," Peso tells me at one point. "Mentally, I'm crazy — the ideas I have, the songs we do. But I think craziness is part of genius."

It's one reason they decided to become business partners and launch Peso's own label, Double P Records. The popularity of música Mexicana has meant a lot of new artists, many of them teenagers, have signed contracts incredibly quickly. In recent years, some of them have revealed publicly that they were unhappy with their agreements. Cano, for example, ranted on Instagram Live about wanting to own his own music, while the singer Gerardo Ortiz sued his label for fraud.

Peso launched Double P with Prajin as a partner last year. He announced he'd be taking the helm as CEO and head of A&R. "It's a known thing that in the Mexican industry and the businesses that are the most well-known and famous at the moment, the truth is they haven't done things for their artists," Peso tells me. "There were strange contracts that were just sketchy as fuck. What we want to do is, from the beginning, make the whole thing super transparent."

One of his first signees was the musician Jasiel Nuñez. (Peso, who co-curated ROLLING STONE's Future 25, selected Nuñez for the list, calling him a phenomenal artist and praising his way of writing.) Nuñez describes Peso as "a really, really good person with a big heart," and says signing with Double P changed his life. "It's also made me a better person, because I'm with good people – we're a team, we're a family."

Prajin sees the label as one way Peso will stand out as a force in the industry. "He's going to have a very long career, especially as an executive in the business, as an A&R or a record-label owner. He's going to be a Jay-Z." It's one reason he's been working with Peso so closely. "What's he going to do if I'm not here? So he needs to learn how to run his business and how to protect himself."

In front of the studio, Prajin and Peso catch up for a few more minutes. Then Peso climbs into a black van, heading toward downtown L.A. He's got a packed day of photo and video shoots, and he seems a little preoccupied: He wants to light a blunt, but one of his assistants – a friend since high school – forgot a lighter, so members of his team are trying to locate a gas station to get him one. Peso puffs on a vape in the meantime and asks the driver to let him connect his phone to play some music. Juicy J's "Bandz a Make Her Dance" starts blasting through the car speakers.

He's had a couple of days off at home in Orange County. Usually when he's off, he's holed up in his game room, playing his PlayStation and smoking weed. Other times, he's bingeing movies. He recently went through a few Disney films, like *Lilo & Stitch* and *Ratatouille*.

He's been getting closer to finishing the LP. "I want it to be a surprise for everyone. I'm focusing on fine-tuning all the details, but there's going to be a lot of flavors, not only of regional Mexican music," he says. "From the beginning, I've liked doing things to get out of my comfort zone. I know everything goes great with corridos, but I also don't pass up opportunities to do other stuff I like." He singles out "Igual Que Un Ángel," the Kali Uchis disco-pop song he jumped on recently. "I couldn't have imagined doing the type of genre I did with Kali, but I think it's a chance to show what Mexicans are made of and what we can do."

Already, he's shown what he can do in a few places. His favorite show of all time is the one he played at El Foro Sol, a giant stadium in Mexico City, followed by a homecoming he had in Guadalajara and a massive gig in Argentina. "I never plan anything. It's just about getting on that stage, enjoying what I'm doing, loosening up as much as possible," he says. "I don't like that twinge of 'I could have done it better. I could have done this. I could have done that.' "

Still, his larger-than-life onstage persona feels so different from the quiet, more-chill 24-year-old in the van, something I observe aloud. He seems to shrug off the idea at first, replying, "There's moments to have fun with your friends, and other moments you have to be more serious." But then he considers his answer a little more and goes on. "I also feel like I'm a little fragmented, and it's part of the multiple personalities I have." I ask him which of his many personalities feels closer to who he is. "I don't know," he says. "All my team can tell you that every day, [for] five minutes, I can be the happiest person. Then in the next five minutes, I transform into something wild." He smiles, half-joking.

What he's more serious about is seeing his achievements as part of a whole: as an accomplishment for Mexico, as a success for his genre. Yet there's a kind of leadership role he's taken on, one that was obvious when he was at the writing camp, guiding a dozen musicians and songwriters. He thinks about this for a second. "I don't consider myself a normal person," he says [*Cont. on 79*]

PRODUCED BY RHIANNA RULE FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS. PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANI PEREZ. LINE PRODUCER: XAVIER HAMEL. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY ITXEL GARCIA AND PETER GIANG. LIGHTING DIRECTION BY SEBASTIAN JOHNSON. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY LANCE WILLIAMS. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: RENEE DODGE. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY CONNOR RAD GYURAS. STUDIO: HUBBLE STUDIO. POSTPRODUCTION BY DALLAS WING. STYLING BY ANASTASIA WALKER. HAIR/BARBER: DAVID THOMAS. GROOMING

Across the genre map and around the world, these are the artists who have us — and our cover star — most excited about the future of music in 2024 and beyond

Rolling Stone future of music

future 25

faye webster

She's won over a legion of fans with her funny, relatable lyrics and a tough-to-pin-down sound. Next up: Handling the anxieties and pressures of serious stardom

BY ANGIE MARTOCCIO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENDRICK BRINSON

FAYE WEBSTER IS KICKING my ass at tennis. We're at the Altadena Town & Country Club in L.A. on a late-January afternoon, playing a very loose set amid pouring rain. One of us is really good; the other (me) has never picked up a racket in her life. But even though I'm pathetically outmatched, Webster is being really sweet about it, cheering from her side of the court whenever I manage to make contact with the heavy, soaking-wet ball (which is almost never).

Our redheaded, bearded coach Nate is equally supportive, instructing us by using phrases like "strike zone" and "ready position." They're foreign to me, but not to my opponent, who eagerly nods along in an oversize white T-shirt and black shorts, her auburn hair tied back with bangs scattered across her forehead. Later, when we retrieve balls with the pick-up hopper, the contraption reminds her of a recent memory. "My mom" – she stops herself with a laugh, then corrects herself – "Santa got me one of those for Christmas." She giggles at her mistake. "*Oops*!"

No one recognizes Webster during the day we spend together in Los Angeles, a stopover just before the Atlanta native heads to Australia for a tour. That sort of anonymity isn't likely to last that much longer. "Lego Ring," the fuzzy, borderline psychedelic rocker she released with longtime pal Lil Yachty in January, has racked up more than 4 million streams. She has a colossal new following on TikTok – ironic, considering she

does not have a TikTok – where clips of her shows receive millions of views and comments like "Our mother is mothering." And with her new album, *Underdressed at the Symphony,* and massive headlining tour, she's headed from cult fandom to a bigger spotlight.

Listeners and journalists alike struggle to categorize Webster's no-fucks-given blend of indie pop, R&B stoner jams, and wistful folk. "She's one of the rare people who has regenerated her own genre," says Jeff Tweedy, who invited Webster to open for Wilco in 2021. "Is it coming at country music from a weird angle, or is it coming at soul music from a weird angle? She's using instrumentation and elements that don't traditionally relate to each other, [but] it all fits together for her. She doesn't seem to get that there are divisions she's crossing. There's no contrivance as to where she's drawing influences from – it's just literally what she likes."

Right now, though, Webster is focused on her serve. Most fans aren't aware Webster played tennis as a kid; if sports do come up, it usually involves her obsession with the Atlanta Braves, or her custom-made yo-yos (she's really good at yo-yoing, too). But it turns out she was an 18-and-under tennis champion. When I mention this, she's shocked I've discovered her secret. "Wow," she says. "That's crazy. That's, like, a Nardwuar fact."

Standing on the court, Webster holds a gift from Nate: a racket custom-made by Naomi Osaka that matches Webster's Nikes, also designed by the tennis star (the shoes feature Osaka's favorite snacks). She recently bought Osaka's new biography, which details her life in the spotlight and her mental-health struggles.

For Webster, Osaka is more than just an athlete she admires. She's someone she can relate to, especially as she faces the pressures of fame (it doesn't hurt that the Obamas have praised both women, with Michelle describing Osaka as "sensational" and Barack including Webster's "Better Distractions" on his favorite songs of 2020).

"She also struggles with attention, and it's inspiring to see how she deals with it," Webster says. "I'll cry onstage sometimes if it's just really overwhelming, or sometimes I'll be really sad and have bad days and just tell the crowd that upfront. Seeing her be vulnerable has helped me be vulnerable."

WEBSTER IS FUNNY. While some may mistakenly pigeonhole her into the "sad girl" genre, there's always an underlying current of humor. Even when she's singing about crying (which is often), it's impossible for her not to add a whimsical twist. On 2019's *Atlanta Millionaires Club,* where on one track she admits she's cried so much that her tears "have gone room temperature," the song's video shows otherwise, with Webster engaging in happy activities like hula dancing and synchronized swimming. *Symphony* is no different, the most lighthearted moments being "eBay Purchase History," a song about – you guessed it – Webster's eBay purchase history.

One thing Webster doesn't particularly love is classic rock. When I ask her about the Beatles, she says "I don't care," but she has a stronger opinion about a certain fellow from Minnesota. "I hate Bob Dylan," she says. "I just never got into it, can't stand him." Her management company, Look Out Kid, is named after a Dylan lyric. "They found out I didn't like him after they signed me!"

But Webster is a die-hard Wilco fan, citing their set list staple "Impossible Germany" as her favorite song of all time. She recruited Wilco guitarist Nels Cline, who plays that song's cosmically awesome solo, for a couple of *Symphony* tracks. "On the first date that Faye [opened for] us, Jeff and I were side stage, and I was completely blown away by her aesthetic," Cline says. "I wasn't expecting it. I was so charmed by it. You could really cruise in a lowrider car to her music. It's smooth without being annoyingly smooth. And Jeff whispered in my ear, 'A lot of her lyrics are really amusing,' so I started paying more attention. And he was right."

Another thing Webster is a die-hard fan of: pedal steel guitar. The instrument has become her trademark, its melted twang supporting her ultra-tender vocals. For this you can thank Matt "Pistol" Stoessel, her longtime guitarist. Webster describes their relationship as "symbiotic," and when I phone Stoessel, it's immediately clear he's her extremely chill musical counterpart. It's no surprise that Stoessel is a Deadhead who cites Jerry Garcia as his biggest inspiration. Webster tends to emphasize the music over vocals, grooving with her band and stretching tracks out for minutes at a time. "It's the jam-band quality without the noodling," says Stoessel. Case in point: *Underdressed at the Symphony* kicks off with "Thinking About You," a blissed-out journey through Webster's mind that stretches on for nearly seven minutes (naturally, the song was originally titled "Wilco Type Beat").

After our tennis match, Webster and I get lunch at Lunasia, a dim sum restaurant in Pasadena. She sits across from me, sipping on chrysanthemum tea and scrolling the menu on her cellphone. She's allergic to pineapple, so she double-checks her selections – stir-fried cucumber and barbecue chicken dumplings – before ordering. [*Cont. on 76*]

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. HAIR BY KAZIA PFUNTNER. MAKEUP AND STYLING BY MICHELLE MERCADO. PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE: SHIRT BY BRAIN DEAD. LIGHTING TECHNICIAN: DAVID WALTER BANKS. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: DONNY TU. STUDIO: CHIL STUDIOS.

masicka

THE FIRST SIGN that Masicka doesn't stick to any preconceived path arrives when the Jamaican dancehall artist talks about some of his favorite musicians, like Bob Marley, Shabba Ranks — and Lukas Graham, the sensitive Danish pop band that scored a string of hits in the 2010s. "I like artists who sing from their souls, and Lukas is one of those who have a different approach," Masicka, 31, says. "You might think, 'Oh, it's just lovey-dovey,' but I'm hearing words I can connect to." And don't get him started on Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler," which he heard long ago by way of his grandmom. Masicka, who grew up in Portmore, in the southeast of Jamaica, has been making music in his home country for more than 15 years. But as revealed by that playlist, he hasn't been afraid to tug at the boundaries of dancehall by incorporating elements of genres including electronica, quiet-storm R&B, and hip-hop. (His stage name was inspired by 50 Cent's 2005 album, *The Massacre*, which an aunt lent him years ago. "50 Cent reminded me of a dancehall artist," he says. "He's proud of what he's doing and not ashamed to be himself.") His second studio album, last year's *Generation of Kings,* continued Masicka's mission on an even grander scale by blending in Afrobeats and more, setting him up for a major breakthrough. "I was working off more experiences, and trying to be different while keeping my identity," he says. Up next: a summer U.S. tour with his most elaborate stage set. "I think you should not box in yourself to do one thing," he adds. "If you love cars, you're not only going to have a Toyota. You would love to drive a Ferrari or Porsche [or] Lamborghini." **DAVID BROWNE**

john summit

HOW DOES DANCE music sensation John Summit pregame for his set at one of Las Vegas' most popular nightclubs the Friday before the Super Bowl? Lying in bed, eating an airport sandwich. But just because he's horizontal doesn't mean he's unproductive. In fact, he's spending his time cooking up something new that could be house music's next smash hit, or at least a highlight of what his fans hear that night. "I try to make a new song for every set," Summit, 29, says. He's no stranger to Las Vegas, having recently signed on as a resident DJ at the newest LIV nightclub. It's just one of many accomplishments for the star whose hit "Where You Are" with Hayla is nearing 100 million Spotify streams. Summit, who grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, began DJ'ing bars, small clubs, and fraternity parties while attending college in the Midwest, teaching himself how to use the equipment with YouTube tutorials. "I went to all the after-hours spots and all the warehouses, and what they play is the underground style of house music," he says. This summer, he'll headline Madison Square Garden. He's also readying a debut album for around the same time. "I feel like I'm at the top of the world right now," he says. **WAISS ARAMESH**

FROM TOP: NICHOLAS GREGG; FELICIA ABBAN; DANIEL ZULIANI

lola brooke

ONE AFTERNOON, Shyniece Thomas, a.k.a. Lola Brooke, was in her Brooklyn apartment contemplating the pitfalls of life as a rapper. "Sometimes you don't feel safe — in your own hometown — all because of your occupation," she says. "I was just pouring my heart out about how I felt, and how others might have been feeling." Being from Brooklyn suits her well; smooth self-regard and tight-lipped maturity are her calling cards, à la the Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, and Pop Smoke. Yet she comes across as strikingly vulnerable on "God Bless the Rappers," the track she recorded that day, reeling off the names of artists who have died before their time ("They say the most dangerous job is for the rappers"). It's a highlight of *Dennis Daughter,* the debut LP that has positioned Brooke as a torchbearer for New York rap — and banished any idea that she might be simply a viral sensation after her 2021 single "Don't Play With It" racked up millions of views on TikTok and Instagram. "Things don't bother me," she adds. "I'm just aware of things." **JAYSON BUFORD**

J Noa

THERE ARE FEW people on planet Earth who can rap as fast as J Noa — and even fewer who actually have something to say. On her 2023 debut EP, *Autodidactica*, the 18-year-old MC from the 5 de Abril barrio in San Cristóbal, Dominican Republic, showcased one of the most nimble flows in rap of any language. The frenetic, reggaeton-adjacent stylings of dembow are huge in the Dominican Republic and beyond, but while most dembow stars get the dance floor hyped, J Noa's lyrics are more likely to stop you cold in your tracks. On her debut single, "Betty," she weaves a cautionary tale of teen pregnancy, in which a young girl gets taken advantage of and abandoned with her baby, only to leave her own mother with the responsibility of raising the child. On other tracks, she explores the epidemic of depression in young people and acknowledges the give and take of the streets: "*La calle te enseña y también te engaña/Por eso aquí no roncamos*" ("The streets teach but they also deceive/Which is why we don't sleep"). "I grew up in the barrio, and it wasn't the best place, but it wasn't the worst," she says. "I feel a responsibility to defend my barrio. My people are counting on it! I need to represent them." **MATTHEW ISMAEL RUIZ**

mc abdul

MC ABDUL IS in Cairo when I connect with him over Zoom. "I just got my family out of Gaza three days ago," the Palestinian rapper, 15, says. "It's the first time I reunited with them in five months." As the eldest of five, his upbringing in Gaza was defined by looking after his siblings while navigating life under Israeli occupation. Last year, he moved to L.A. with his father — but not long after they arrived, war broke out again back home. In those trying months, he turned to music, which has been a lifeline since his debut single got 6 million Instagram views in 2021. Now, with his mom and siblings safe, he's focused on milestones like playing Rolling Loud: "This is what I was born to do." **BOUTAYNA CHOKRANE**

scowl

WHEN SCOWL toured the country last year, they were obsessed with a simple game: Take a die, roll it, and whoever gets a six can chuck it at the nearest band member. "There were dice flying everywhere!" frontperson Kat Moss, 26, says. "It was the most obnoxious game," adds guitarist Mikey Bifolco, 32. It's also a good metaphor for being in a successful hardcore band these days: random, messy, potentially painful, but ultimately a good time. As for Scowl, everything's been coming up sevens for the Santa Cruz, California, band since they started releasing music in 2019: endorsements from Post Malone, an opening slot for Limp Bizkit at Madison Square Garden, and a nearly sold-out tour of their own. "I feel like we tricked somebody," Moss marvels. **BRENNA EHRLICH**

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ALESSANDRO MARTINO; DEIRA PEDROSE; ALICE BAXLEY

ryan castro

WHEN PESO PLUMA wanted to know more about reggaeton, he went to Colombia to learn from Ryan Castro. "I've always listened to him, since before I was an artist," this issue's cover star says. "His music was a part of my nights out with my friends." Peso is just one of the many fans that Castro has made since he began busking in the streets and buses of Medellín at age 17. A charismatic youth with a bold timbre to match, Castro sang for a living and saved the tips he got to record his own music someday. "I had many opportunities to do bad things to get money," says Castro, now 30, hinting at the drug trade that dominated his hometown for decades. But he was more interested in what he saw in biopics like Eminem's *8 Mile* and 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*: "Instead of picking up a gun, they picked up a pen to write." When we speak over Zoom, Castro has two platinum plaques for "Quema," his hit song with Peso, on the wall behind him. He's also scored high-profile collabs with Karol G, J Balvin, and Maluma. But he wants his upcoming debut, *El Cantante del Ghetto*, to pay tribute to the people of Pedregal, the neighborhood where he grew up. "They were the first people who listened to me. I will always carry them in my heart." **MAYA GEORGI**

omah lay

OMAH LAY recoils hard when he sees the snow piling up outside of my window over Zoom. "I cannot deal with snow," the Nigerian star, 26, says. "Bro, I can't even deal with the weather in London." Lately, when he's not in Lagos, he's been spending a lot of time in Europe, where he has a fervent fan base that sings his distinct brand of emotional Afrobeats back to him at large shows. Since breaking through in 2020, he's made music that's so dark and brooding that his fans have coined the term "Afro-depression" to describe it. But he beams when he talks about the new album he's been working on in London. "I'm in kind of a new place right now," he says. "I strongly believe that this year, the thing everybody's familiar with as Afrobeats is going to change a lot, and I am going to be the front guy — one of the leaders." **MANKAPRR CONTEH**

the last dinner party

ANY SHAME HAD been left squarely on the street outside of the Bowery Ballroom last fall as the Last Dinner Party singer Abigail Morris whirled around the stage like a cheeky toddler at a wedding reception. "And I will fuck you, like nothing matters," the audience bragged in unison as the London-based indie-rock band played its debut single, "Nothing Matters," an irrepressible ode to the ferality of love and good, old-fashioned fornication. The Last Dinner Party sold out all of the shows on their first U.S. tour with performances like this. They're a band that evokes girlhood: Even in the satin ribbon swinging from the neck of Georgia Davies' bass guitar, they conjure the youthful impetuosity before "the man" attempts to tell you who you are, and the resistance to that message after he does. "You feel this kind of safety performing in a group like this because, onstage and offstage, we're so close," Morris says on Zoom weeks after the show. "What's key is, like, none of us are putting on an act. None of us are characters. We're just having fun, really." Since forming just three years ago, the Last Dinner Party have opened for both the Rolling Stones and Lana Del Rey at Hyde Park and packed tents at Glastonbury, all before their debut LP arrived this year. "It's scary, but because there's five of us, it's less daunting," adds guitarist Lizzie Mayland. "I think if we were solo artists, we would've cracked by now. But we've kind of gone insane together." **AUDRA HEINRICHS**

FROM TOP: ZEKARIA AL-BOSTANI; TOM MARSHAK; EL SKINNY

Teezo Touchdown

Superstars on his side, haters yelling in his ear: the life of a wildly stylish, genre-smashing rap-rock star

BY BRIAN HIATT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AIJANI PAYNE

YOU'RE TOO OLD for this. It should have happened for you already.

It takes no small amount of bravado to call yourself Teezo Touchdown, to walk around with metal nails dangling from your hair, to tap an aggro rap-rock vein few others are mining, to croon like a mutant Morrissey in the middle of a Travis Scott song and then face arenas full of Scott's rageaholic teen fans every night. But the real money and the big solo hits haven't arrived yet, and for one of the buzziest and most polarizing new artists of the moment, it sometimes feels like the voices of critics and doubters are everywhere. They're loudest inside his own head.

Backstage one December evening, in a dressing room deep inside New York's Madison Square Garden, Teezo narrates that inner monologue. " 'Nah, you ain't really supposed to be here,' " he says. " 'You're 31. This should've *been* happened.' " He leans back on a gray couch that complements all of his silver-colored adornments: the nails in his hair; the chain on his neck; the stage glitter speckling his body; the ring in his septum; the hoops in each ear, one tiny, the other oversize, with a bonus nail affixed to it; the grills on his teeth; the metal on the two belts stacked on his waist. The letter "T" is scrawled on each cheek in black mascara. He's fulfilled his duties for the day as Scott's opening act, playing a 20-minute set and then popping up, as usual, during Scott's performance to sing on their collaboration, "Modern Jam." A few hundred yards away, Scott is still onstage, and the room keeps rattling in rhythm with his apocalyptic array of subwoofers.

Teezo feels better when he reminds himself that Scott told him he could be the biggest artist in the world, or that Drake publicly said Teezo is making "some of the best music ever." But sometimes he feels like he's just Texas-born Aaron Lashane Thomas, that he's still the overweight, swimming-with-his-shirt-on kid he once was. "It's a lot of insecurity to overcome to be a rock star, you know?" he says. Onstage, even tonight, he gets caught up inside his head: "*Should I say this? Am I yapping? I can do a cool move here.*"

So, yes, Teezo Touchdown is a work in progress. But who isn't? In any case, after years of struggle – and one life-changing tragedy – last year was his big breakout. In September, he dropped his debut album, *How Do You Sleep at Night?,* which is full of musical invention and sharp, guitar-buoyed hooks, with Teezo singing as much as he raps, all the while bringing the rock influences implicit in music like Scott's and Playboi Carti's to the surface. Around the same time, Teezo made memorable guest appearances on Scott's *Utopia* and on two songs on Drake's *For All the Dogs,* landed his opening slot with Scott, and booked his own solo tour which starts in March.

The artist who much of the world met last fall had his face shrouded by a curtain of metal, and the nails-as-hair thing has been key to the Teezo Touchdown gestalt since nearly the beginning. It started with one or two, before nearly taking over his entire look. (He wanted them to be actual nine-inch nails at one point, but learned they don't exist.) Once he stumbled upon the style, circa 2019, he needed a sound to match, a quest that led him away from more conventional hip-hop into something more rock-influenced, beginning with that year's viral hit "100 Drums," which flipped Panic! At the Disco's "I Write Sins Not Tragedies" into an anti-gun-violence rap-rock

ALPHA
ALPHA

Teezo has a sense of humor about his doubters. "It's like, 'Drake said you're the best music ever? What does *he* know? Teezo Touchdown? Mid! He's trying too hard.'"

rager. Lately, though, he's been dialing it down. "I didn't wanna lose this," he says, gently yanking on one of the nails, "but I didn't want to make it my main character trait."

His hair is mostly just hair now, shorn into a Prince-in-the-Nineties mullet-y shag, and he's pared down his tonsorial nail collection to just a few in the back. It's a notable change in style that stemmed in part from a conversation with one of the many veteran artists who have taken an interest in his career, Pharrell Williams. "He was like, 'Yo, when I first seen you, I was like, I really hope that the nails don't make him unapproachable,'" Teezo recalls.

The weight of all that metal was getting to him, too, and he was feeling less need to conceal himself. "I want you to focus on this face right here," he says. He's also stopped wearing giant, linebacker-style shoulder pads, a fashion choice he now says came from "hiding my body, being self-conscious about my body and stuff."

Contrary to his chosen name, Teezo's lone football experience, in middle school, lasted a mere week, ending when he went up against a kid named Sean. "It was damn near an Adam Sandler movie how it happened," he says, with a flash of grills. "Sean looked like he *drove* to middle school.... They blew that whistle, and the next thing I know, my ankles went to my ears. And the next week, I was in band."

Teezo's debut hasn't been an instant smash, and the combination of his look, those rock inflections, and his sudden prominence – the guest spots, the five-star review from Drake – may have backfired, tempting some critics to slam him to the ground nearly as hard as Sean did, dismissing him as a pandering gimmick. As Teezo puts it, "It's like, 'Drake said you're the best music ever? What does *he* know? Teezo Touchdown? Mid! He's trying too hard.'"

He's taken a lot of jabs for being 31 years old, young for the Earth, but somewhat old for a new artist making edgy, hip-hop-adjacent music. "I'm not out here trying to cosplay like, 'Hey, fellow young people!'" he says. "I'm being Aaron Thomas right now, at the age of 31. But they attack what they know you can't change. That's what gives insecurities their power."

Through all of it, he keeps trying to learn from his heroes, living and dead. He's deep into a Prince biography, and he just watched a [*Cont. on 77*]

jasiel nuñez

IF YOU ASK Peso Pluma what he likes most about his *compa* Jasiel Nuñez, he'll tell you it's his pen. He'll go off about the musician's ability to express himself about love and life through complex metaphors and visual storytelling. "The way he writes and shares his feelings through the paper is very special," Peso says. "He has so many lyrics and anecdotes and so much more to show." Just more than a year since signing to Peso's Double P label, Nuñez, 24, has quickly positioned himself as one of música Mexicana's leading songwriters. On "Lagunas," he wishes he could kiss an ex-lover's forehead once again. On "Corazón Frío," meteors hit his and his partner's planet of love. "I enter a sort of meditative state, like you forget about everything and you begin to vent what you're feeling in that moment," Nuñez says. "If I'm happy, I'll make something joyful, but if I feel disappointed or I dated someone and it didn't end up happening, I try to reach that feeling." Nuñez grew up in Guadalajara thinking, like many Mexican kids, that he'd be a soccer player. (He's a Cruz Azul fan.) As a teen, he started singing and entering freestyle rap battles. He first met Peso at a friend's house party in early 2020, when they were both local artists hoping to build an audience beyond their scene in Guadalajara. "We had a promise we made from the start: Whoever makes it first, we're going to help the other out," Peso says. "That promise will be intact for life." **TOMÁS MIER**

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. STYLING BY JENNY HAAPALA. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY DOM ALEXANDER. HAIR BY MONIQUE AVANT. MAKEUP BY KEITA MOORE AT THE ONLY AGENCY USING PAT MCGRATH LABS. LIGHTING DIRECTOR: HAYDEN BULLARD. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: DUCK FEENEY. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY SARAJANE OWUSU AND JORDAN PETERSON. PREVIOUS SPREAD: DRESS BY LUAR. SKIRT BY KOVEN 20:24. BELT BY SEKS. NECKLACE BY CHRIS HABANA. NAIL EARRING BY BOND HARDWARE. DANGLY EARRING BY JUSTINE CLENQUET. NOSE JEWELRY BY SHO KONISHI. LIP JEWELRY BY AUSTIN JAMES SMITH. OPPOSITE PAGE: JACKET BY SEKS. LACE TOP AND SPIDER BELT BY KOVEN 20:24. NECKLACE BY VITALY. RAZOR EARRING BY JOHNNY NELSON. CROSS EARRING BY MARTINE ALI. LIP AND FACE JEWELRY BY INAUREM. THIS PAGE FROM TOP: RYAN CLEMENS; SANTIAGO ARENOVSKI; MATT PASKERT.

cupcakepelle

PINK PLASTIC COWS and fake aqua-blue trucks decorated the lobby of the Wiltern in L.A. during the last night of Chappell Roan's U.S. Midwest Princess Tour in November. Her fans — donning sparkly devil horns and bedazzled bralettes decorated with hearts — posed for photos as they made their way into the art-deco venue, where death-dropping drag queens lip-synced onstage. It's just one example of how the pop singer born Kayleigh Rose Amstutz, who has described Chappell Roan as "a drag-queen version of myself," is building her own glittery universe, one song and show at a time. By doing so, Roan, 26, has garnered a fierce, tightknit, largely queer fan base that's rapidly expanding to the general population. She's currently working on the follow-up to her acclaimed debut album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess,* with producer Dan Nigro (known for working with Olivia Rodrigo), and she just wrapped a run of high-profile shows opening on Rodrigo's *Guts* tour. "This just rocks," Roan says. "It's amazing to be living up my little pop-star life. It's so slay." **T.M.**

wyatt flores

WYATT FLORES CAN pinpoint the exact moment he says the party ended in country music. After a decade-plus of tailgating, beer-drinking songs clogging up playlists, the pandemic struck and forced artists and fans alike indoors with their thoughts. And shit got real, fast. "They got trapped inside of wherever they were and they had a lot of time to sit down and think, and that flustered up their minds," Flores says. "People felt emotions that they hadn't felt before." Emotional songwriting just happened to be Flores' bread-and-butter. A 22-year-old Oklahoman who often sings about subjects like addiction and suicide, he quickly found an audience for the songs he was posting on TikTok, rich in substance and naked in vulnerability. "Please Don't Go," a desperate plea to a loved one not to take their own life, exploded. Now, he's at the forefront of a movement in country music, alongside emo-country kingpins like Zach Bryan and Charles Wesley Godwin, whose emotional lyrics sung over acoustic guitars are packing more of a punch than bro-branded whiskey. At Nashville's Ryman Auditorium last December, Flores opened for Godwin and had fans' rapt attention when he spoke candidly about his own battles with anxiety. (In February, he canceled a string of his own concerts, citing the stress of nonstop touring.) "If I don't talk about it with the crowd, and I don't share my feelings, how can I expect them to share theirs with someone else?" Flores says. "I'm trying to lead by example the best I can." **JOSEPH HUDAK**

yovngchimi

EVER SINCE Yovngchimi burst onto the stage in 2021, his ascent through the Latin trap scene has been nothing short of impressive. Within his rookie year, the Puerto Rican rapper, 28, was already collaborating with established names like Eladio Carrión and Ñengo Flow on hits like "Glizzy Walk 2.5" and "BAPE (Remix)." In 2023, he teamed up with DJ Drama for the *Gangsta Grillz: Mvrda Gvng* mixtape; appeared on Bad Bunny's blockbuster return-to-trap album, *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana;* and released his own debut LP, *WLGS (Whole Lotta Gvng Shit)*. His raw lyrics and style are what have garnered him so many fans, and made him an artists' favorite as well. His cadence and delivery feel authentic; whether he's rapping about cruising around the city in a Lamborghini Diablo or being blessed by Santería saints before spinning the block, he sells the storytelling in a way that can get listeners' blood pumping. "Yovngchimi has a very particular style, because of the lingo they speak in Puerto Rico," Peso Pluma tells *Rolling Stone*. "It makes it very special, and he uses it perfectly." Raised in the Luis Lloréns Torres public housing complex of San Juan, Chimi didn't step foot inside a recording booth until well into his twenties. The way he sees it, being chosen for this list edges him closer to his goal of expanding into the English-language market. "Even though I'm really confident about how good I am, it's still surprising when things like these happen because we're still new in this game," he says. "So, yeah, it feels dope!" **JUAN J. ARROYO**

samia

TOWARD THE END of her song "Amelia," Samia walks into a party. "I'm writing a poem, somebody stop me," she sings over a chirpy beat — a self-aware quip from the 27-year-old musician who's better than almost anyone at turning fleeting moments into poetry. "I love romanticizing shit, and I always have," she says. "I was an internally dramatic child." Over two albums, Samia has cemented herself as one of indie rock's most poignant and brazen songwriters. On "Kill Her Freak Out," she leans into full hysterical theatrics when telling a past lover "I hope you marry the girl from your hometown/And I'll fucking kill her/And I'll fucking freak out," but her vocal delivery remains stoic over a wobbly, sparse organ composition. (Is it any wonder that Olivia Rodrigo left a TikTok comment calling it the "best song ever"?) "I write songs when I feel crazy," Samia adds. "The best-case scenario is being met with a cacophony of strangers' voices being like, 'You're not crazy.'" **LEAH LU**

peggy gou

"EVERY SONG THAT I do has to have sexiness to it," says Peggy Gou, the Berlin-based, South Korea-born DJ, singer, producer, and songwriter who's as close to an It girl as anyone in today's club scene. Maybe you came across Gou, 32, last year on one of your in-the-know friends' IG stories, where you saw her hovering over a soundboard, carefree and focused. Or maybe you heard her hit "(It Goes Like) Nanana" on TikTok, where it has more than 7 million views, and were blown away by a song that evokes the bacchanalias of yesteryear while sounding altogether futuristic. Whatever comes next, she's keeping full creative control. "Whether it's cover art, or the music and the fashion, I just am not afraid to do it, and fail at it and learn it," Gou says. "I don't really take shit from other people." **ILANA WOLDENBERG**

black sherif

PRECEDED BY A crew of gymnasts who flailed fire and themselves high in the air, Black Sherif earned a hero's welcome when he took the stage at El-Wak Stadium in Accra, Ghana, last December. The sole Ghanaian artist headlining the AfroFuture festival, he looked like a dystopian gladiator, stomping in massive Rick Owens sneakers, a striped denim skort, and shoulder pads. "You can't see sound, but you can represent it with a style," he says later over Zoom. Black Sherif, 22, has become one of his country's brightest stars with an eclectic remaking of U.K. drill, highlife, and reggae; he's also taken inspiration from Norwegian metal, country, blues, and more. One thing he's certain of: The future of music is African. "I'm really in touch with this African soil," he says. "It's not only just Afrobeats and amapiano ... there are so many more exciting genres that people are doing here." **M.C.**

FROM TOP: ANFERNY RODRÍGUEZ; JACQ JUSTICE; FAROUK SUMAILA; JONGHA PARK

saiko

A COUPLE OF years ago, the Spanish reggaeton star Saiko was talking with his friend's stepdad, Walter, known for his spiritual wisdom and being in touch with the metaphysical. "He told me [I] have to name a song 'San Walter,'" Saiko, 21, recalls. "He tells me, 'One day, you'll understand.... You'll see: When it comes out, I'm going to help everything go well.'" At the time, Saiko already had a couple of songs with a few thousand streams, but he was still waiting for a true breakthrough. He went into the studio that day to make a track inspired by Walter's spiritual practices, and dropped "San Walter" in August 2022; a week later, he dropped a drum-and-bass-infused track called "Polaris." "And the rest is history," he says with a giggle. "Polaris" became his biggest hit to date, with more than 204 million streams on Spotify, and helped him get a spot opening for Colombian star Feid on tour in the U.S. last fall. Saiko grew up listening to reggaeton legends like Daddy Yankee and Don Omar, and he got his start performing at freestyle *batallas de gallos*, or cockfights. "Many don't like when Spaniards make this type of music, but people tell me that I know how to make it," he says. Today, Saiko is one of the most promising voices in the genre, and he's ready to level up again with his debut concept album, *Sakura*. "*La neta,* he's so young and has a lot of talent he'll exploit so well," Peso Pluma says. "He has a lot to give. He has the potential to be one of the greatest musical references." **T.M.**

FROM TOP: GUNNER STAHL; SOURCE MUSIC; OLEG BROVCHENKO

young nudy

GROWING UP IN East Atlanta's Paradise East apartments, Young Nudy — born Quantavious Tavario Thomas — lived a lifestyle reflected in his grittier raps. Eventually, he followed his cousin 21 Savage's path out of the streets and into the booth. Today, he's on the verge of crossover stardom at age 31, following the platinum success of his single "Peaches & Eggplants." Buoyed by pulsing synths and an irresistible "boaw, boaw, boaw" ad-lib that blew up on TikTok, it's exemplary of his brash yet charming style. ("It's amazing how you don't even need to know the language to feel the song, you know?" raves Peso Pluma.) With his preference for "weird" beats, colorful artwork, and songs titled after food, Nudy has quickly become a distinctive figure in the new Atlanta. "I just do me and have fun," he says. "It worked out for me." **ANDRE GEE**

le sserafim

WHEN YOU WITNESS the confidence, composure, and professionalism that Le Sserafim bring to every performance, it can be hard to believe that they're only in their second year as a group. In fact, several members have "past lives" that helped get them where they are today — from Kim Chaewon and Sakura's time in the girl group IZ*ONE to Kazuha's time studying ballet in Europe. But it's as a five-piece group, together with bandmates Huh Yunjin and Hong Eunchae, that they've found their stride. Le Sserafim put themselves on the map in 2023 as a K-pop group with top-notch choreography and unforgettable performances. It was a year full of milestones: They had their first fan meeting, went on their first tour, performed in the U.S. for the first time, and became brand ambassadors for Louis Vuitton, to cite just a few accomplishments. Playing in the U.S. was a surreal experience, especially for Yunjin, who grew up in upstate New York: "I used to do all of my auditions in New York ... to go there all together was really memorable," she says. This spring has the potential to put the group on an even higher trajectory, thanks to their first Coachella performance — something that all five members are thinking about. "I think it'll be a part of Le Sserafim's history," Sakura says. "Success there will open up more opportunities for us. I really want it to go well!" Chaewon is excited to perform there, too. "Being invited to the festival this year, especially this early in our career, is something I'm still trying to grasp," she says. Yunjin might be the one to say it best: "We watched Blackpink's Coachella performance last year, and we learned a lot from just watching," she adds. "But we were also like, 'It would be so cool for us to perform there some day. That would be such a dream.' We had no idea we'd be performing the next year! It's absolutely crazy." **KRISTINE KWAK**

YOUNG MIKO

Funny, charming, and unapologetically raunchy, she's the Puerto Rican star everyone wants to work with

BY FRANCES SOLÁ-SANTIAGO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY THALÍA GOCHEZ

YOUNG MIKO IS TAKING ME for a drive to Piñones, the northeastern Puerto Rico hot spot known for its mesmerizing ocean views and long history as a stronghold of Afro-Caribbean culture. "I knew I had to bring you here," she tells me. And she was right: A Puerto Rican in the diaspora always longs to come home to a paradisiacal drive along the coast, stopping for food and drinks, and smelling the salty air along the way.

Miko knows all about that. February just started, and the 26-year-old urbano wunderkind is making her way back from a monthlong trip that took her to Los Angeles, Miami, and New York as she wraps her debut full-length album. She's spent much of the past year away from home, traveling across Spain and Latin America for her *Trap Kitty* world tour. In between, she played the biggest gigs of her career: seven nights opening for Karol G at stadiums from Los Angeles to New Jersey. Miko still calls Puerto Rico home for now, but she's getting acquainted with a reality generations of Puerto Ricans before her have had to face: You have to leave to make your dreams come true, or even just to find work. "Now I understand why Puerto Ricans who live outside are sometimes even more patriotic," she tells me as we make our way to Piñones.

The past three years have propelled Young Miko from a tattoo artist with 10,000 followers on Instagram to a global Latin-music phenomenon with more than 31 million monthly listeners on Spotify. She appeared on some of 2023's biggest albums – Bad Bunny's *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana* and Tainy's *Data* among them – lending her tough yet delicate voice and sly Spanglish lyricism to both projects as one of few featured women collaborators. Last summer, she made her first appearance on the *Billboard* Hot 100 with a Feid duet. It all came on the heels of her 2022 EP, *Trap Kitty,* the project that positioned her as one of urbano's most exciting talents. "Sometimes I feel like the car is going really fast and I'm just holding on for dear life," Miko says.

You wouldn't know that by watching Miko swiftly cruise through Piñones at the wheel of a tall blue SUV, adding to a sense of adventure typical to this area. Before we made our way there, she asked her friend Kaly – sitting in the back with Sofia, Miko's publicist – to put on a playlist the artist has been working on for a while. It's filled with early-2000s Spanish-language hits, from Alek Syntek and Ana Torroja's "Duele el Amor" to La Quinta Estación's "El Sol No Re-

gresa.” It’s the kind of music we both grew up listening to on Puerto Rican radio, and according to Miko, the type of tracks that are just not made anymore. “I don’t know what they put in songs back then,” she says.

Miko’s not quite sure why this music is fueling her mood lately, but she confesses that a good fictional heartbreak is always necessary. The classic structure of those ballads still influences her today: She was inspired by those short verses and repetitive chorus breakdowns for her hit “Riri.”

The vibe of Miko’s music thus far has been more one-night stand than lifelong romance. But when I ask her if ballads would ever be her thing, she laughs: “Maybe!” To be fair, some of her biggest inspirations redefined the concept of heartbreaking ballads: Ricky Martin, Kany García, Miguel Bosé, Shakira, and Julieta Venegas are all on that list. Although she hasn’t met most of her idols, she recently learned Shakira is a fan.

Moving among legends is one of those new realities that make Miko feel like she’s living in a movie of her own making. From bombastic duo Jowell and Randy to pioneering producer Tainy, it’s hard to find someone in urbano who hasn’t endorsed Miko’s knack for punny lyricism and sultry bars. She’s collaborated with other emerging talents, like Villano Antillano, Tokischa, and Nicki Nicole, as well as established heavy hitters like Arcángel, Yandel, and Wisin. She still has one big collaboration on her wish list: Doja Cat. “I’m such a fan of hers from forever ago, when she’d release stuff in, like, 2015,” she says. “That would be so amazing.”

Miko is one of a few queer women changing urbano from the inside, transforming its sound and lyrics to channel a more free and inclusive reality for both artists and fans. It’s a feat Miko says she’s able to do thanks to other queer artists before her, like Martin and García, whose coming-out stories made for big tabloid fodder. “They’re legends for doing what they did,” she says.

Miko’s lyrics are filled with raunchy innuendoes that speak directly to women, something she never had doubts about when she first started her career. Her self-assurance as a queer woman has a lot to do with her parents’ acceptance, which she says influenced her view of the world. “I was born at the right moment,” she says. “There’s still a lot to do, obviously, but I think it’s only going forward. What a time to be alive.”

Perhaps it’s because of Miko’s bravery that her fans have felt the freedom to create their own identity. It all started when a fan posted on X (formerly Twitter) about liking Miko so much they felt like a “mikosexual.” “They just ran with it,” Miko says. “I have the best fandom in the world.”

When we meet in early February, Miko’s long-awaited collaboration with Argentinian producer Bizarrap has just surpassed 50 million views on YouTube. She first manifested the track in her 2022 hit “Bi,” where she imagined flirting with “a baby from Argentina who asks me, ‘When’s the Biza session coming out?’ ” Over Bizarrap’s electronic-rap hybrid beat, Miko flaunts the spoils of her success, running Jet Skis in Mallorca, Spain, and flying first-class to Madrid.

“I was born at the right moment,” says Miko. “There’s still a lot to do, but I think it’s only going forward.”

Lately, she’s been spending time with some of the biggest stars on the planet. Back in 2023, she and Bad Bunny crossed paths in Los Angeles, where they recorded “Fina” for the Puerto Rican superstar’s latest album. Miko recalls being enamored with the track from the moment he showed it to her: “I heard that Tego sample and went crazy,” she says, referring to the tidbit from Tego Calderón’s “Pa’ Que Retozen” sprinkled through the track.

Miko’s time on tour with Karol G proved another pinch-me moment. Not only was Miko the opener, but she also joined the Colombian Grammy winner to sing their collaboration “Dispo,” from Karol’s most recent album. At one show, Miko grabbed Karol’s hand to grind onstage, prompting the Colombian to scream into the mic, “Now, I’m the one that’s nervous!” “It was one of the most fun experiences,” Miko says of the tour. “She’s mesmerizing.”

Although the two first interacted at a festival in L.A. in January 2023, and shared the stage in Puerto Rico during a Karol G concert that spring, they actually started bonding later, over FaceTime. Miko says that she ignored the first [*Cont. on 78*]

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. STYLING BY STORM PABLO. HAIR BY PABLO MACÍAS. MAKEUP BY JONUEL NADER LOPEZ. RETOUCHING BY ARGEL ROJO. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY MIA BELLA CHAVEZ. LIGHTING DIRECTION BY ASH ALEXANDER. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY MARIA ROMERO. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: JAMES ARMAS. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY KASEY TOVAR. STUDIO: DUST STUDIOS. PREVIOUS SPREAD: WALLET CHAIN BY CNNTRA. GLASSES AND JEWELRY BY KWK BY KAY KWOK. T-SHIRT BY NEW BED STUY. THIS PAGE: BLAZER BY ACNE STUDIOS. TOP BY NEW BED STUY.

veeze

VEEZE HAS JOKED that 2022 was his "rap internship" as he prepped his debut LP, *Ganger,* and spent time around rap stars like Lil Baby and Lil Yachty. Now, with the album out, the 29-year-old Detroit native is on the verge of stardom. "It's always good to see the feedback come back good on something you was working on," he says. Veeze's sludgy delivery and stellar ear for beats make him one of rap's most fun listens, as heard on *Ganger* — a 21-track project showcasing Veeze as a double-cup-wielding villain over a refreshing variety of production. Every artist *talks* about an ambitious creative process, but you can hear it on a project like this. On "You know i," he samples Bone Thugs' "Thuggish Ruggish Bone" on two different

beats while simultaneously borrowing a "Big Pimpin" line from Jay-Z. On "Not a Drill," he juxtaposes titanic horns and quaking bass drums with his slithery delivery. ("I ain't never even heard no beat that sounded like that before," he says.) Last year, Veeze struck a partnership with Warner Records for his own Navy Wavy Records; he says he's looking for talent to bring into the fold. He's also steadily recording, letting the process flow freely. "We just be doing shit," he says. "Sometimes I do a couple songs, sometimes I only do one song. I work every day, though, so I make a boundless amount." Hopefully, the new artists around him are taking notes. **A.G.**

mirror

GROWING UP in Hong Kong, the future members of the 12-piece boy band Mirror had all kinds of jobs — from personal trainers to dancers and martial-arts instructors. "The 12 of us did not debut from a training program," says Edan (who, like the other members, goes by his first name). "We came from different places and backgrounds in Hong Kong, and so we have different strengths." One thing that they all had in common was a love of Cantopop, which blends Cantonese lyrics with a melting pot of disco, soft rock, pop, and jazz sounds. Now, the men in Mirror believe the time is ripe to bring the sound of their youth back to the mainstream, while also evolving toward a more modern, international style. "I think the fact that there's still a lot of people who don't know Mirror is highly motivating," says Keung To. Along with him and Edan, the group includes Anson, Ian, AK, Lokman, Frankie, Alton, Stanley, Jer, Jeremy, and Tiger — all trained dancers who trade vocals. (Lokman is the unofficial leader, though unlike with many of their K-pop counterparts, there are no assigned roles.) They cite influences from Taylor Swift to Michael Jackson to James Brown, as well as Asian acts like Taiwanese star Jay Chou, K-pop sensations NewJeans, and the Japanese girl group Atarashii Gakko! "We look at how hardworking they are and how they are bringing something new to the table, and they inspire us to bring something new as well," Anson says. This spring, they're making their first visit to North America, and they recently cut an English-language single with NBA star Damian Lillard. But they remain dedicated to their hometown. "Our goal is not just to make everyone listen to Mirror's songs," Edan says, "but to reignite people's interest in the entire Hong Kong entertainment industry." **TIM CHAN**

lizzie no

IN THE 64-YEAR history of the Newport Folk Festival, it's fair to say that few singer-songwriters have made their debut there by shredding on a harp amid a sea of noise. But that's exactly what Lizzie No did at Newport two years ago. At the time, No was in the midst of working on *Halfsies,* the daring new album that's bound to introduce them to a larger audience. The songwriting virtuoso (real name Lizzie Quinlan) grew up in New Jersey and spent the past decade touring in semi-obscurity. "Some people try to make you feel like you didn't pay your dues," No says. "I so firmly rebuke that." No, 33, made her first two albums feeling like she needed to prove herself in roots music as a woman of color. "I didn't ever allow a synthesizer ... because I knew that as a Black artist, I was going to be held to a much higher, stricter standard if I wanted to be included in folk or country," she says. On *Halfsies,* No finally incorporates all their disparate influences, from country ballads to hard-charging alt-rockers to age-old folk tunes. "She's dangerous with the pen," says singer-songwriter Bartees Strange, No's former guitarist. Her songwriting, he continues, is "freak level.... And I'm excited for the world to know about it." Adds No: "It's fun to surprise myself with the number of different influences I can fit into my own work and still have it sound like myself. If the song works, that's the evidence." **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN**

FROM TOP: MAKERVILLE; DIWANG VALDEZ; COLE NIELSEN

inside the startup creating a chatgpt for music

Suno AI wants everyone to be able to produce their own pro-level songs — but what does that mean for artists?

BY BRIAN HIATT
ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL

"I'M JUST A soul trapped in this circuitry." The voice singing those lyrics is raw and plaintive, dipping into blue notes. A lone acoustic guitar chugs behind it, punctuating the vocal phrases with tasteful runs. But there's no human behind the voice, no hands on that guitar. There is, in fact, no guitar. In the space of 15 seconds, this credible, even moving, blues song was generated by the latest AI model from a startup named Suno. All it took to summon it from the void was a simple text prompt: "solo acoustic Mississippi Delta blues about a sad AI." To be maximally precise, the song is the work of two AI models in collaboration: Suno's model creates all the music itself, while calling on OpenAI's ChatGPT to generate the lyrics and even a title: "Soul of the Machine."

Online, Suno's creations are starting to generate reactions like "How the fuck is this real?" As this particular track plays over a Sonos speaker in Suno's temporary headquarters, steps away from the Harvard campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts, even some of the people behind the technology are ever-so-slightly unnerved. There's some nervous laughter, alongside murmurs of "Holy shit" and "Oh, boy." It's mid-February, and we're playing with their new model, V3, which is still a couple of weeks from public release. In this case, it took only three tries to get that startling result. The first two were decent, but a simple tweak to my prompt – co-founder Keenan Freyberg suggested adding the word "Mississippi" – resulted in something far more uncanny.

Over the past year alone, generative AI has made major strides in producing credible text, images (via services like Midjourney), and even video, particularly with OpenAI's new Sora tool. But audio, and music in particular, has lagged. Suno appears to be cracking the code to AI music, and its founders' ambitions are nearly limitless – they imagine a world of wildly democratized music making. The most vocal of the co-founders, Mikey Shulman, a boyishly charming, backpack-toting 37-year-old with a Harvard Ph.D. in physics, envisions a billion people worldwide paying 10 bucks a month to create songs with Suno. The fact that music listeners so vastly outnumber music-makers at the moment is "so lopsided," he argues, seeing Suno as poised to fix that perceived imbalance.

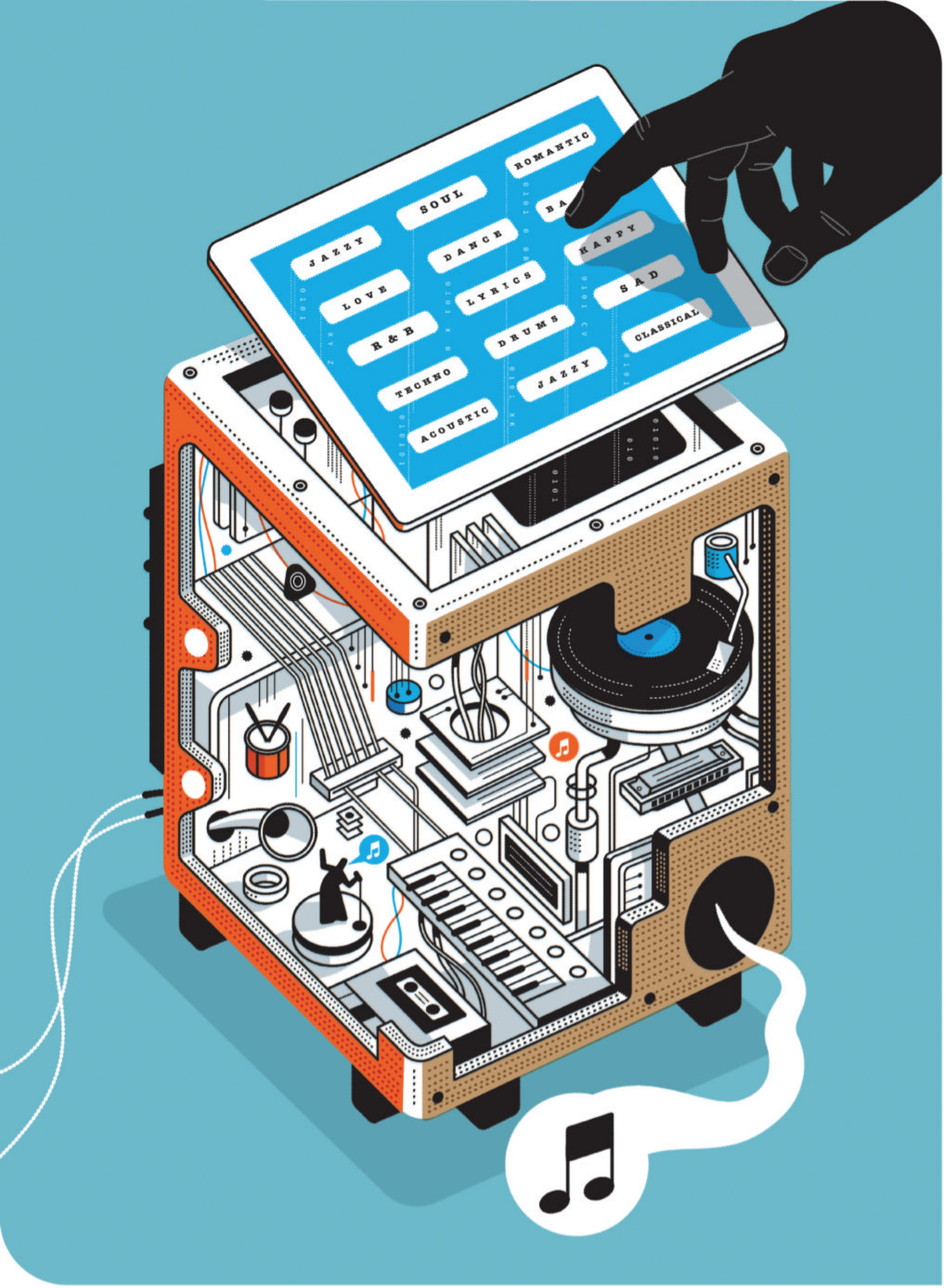
Most AI-generated art so far is, at best, kitsch, à la the hyperrealistic sci-fi junk that so many Midjourney users seem intent on generating. But "Soul of the Machine" feels like something different – the most powerful and unsettling AI creation I've encountered in any medium. Its very existence feels like a fissure in reality, at once awe-inspiring and vaguely unholy, and I keep thinking of the Arthur C. Clarke quote that seems made for the generative-AI era: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." A few weeks after returning from Cambridge, I send the song off to Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid, who's been outspoken about the perils and possibilities of AI music. He notes his "wonder, shock, horror" at the song's "disturbing verisimilitude." "The long-running dystopian ideal of separating difficult, messy, undesirable, and despised humanity from its creative output is at hand," he writes, pointing out the problematic nature of an AI singing the blues, "an African American idiom, deeply tied to historical human trauma, and enslavement."

Suno is barely two years old. Co-founders Shulman, Freyberg, Georg Kucsko, and Martin Camacho, all machine-learning experts, worked together until 2022 at another Cambridge company, Kensho Technologies, which focused on finding AI solutions to complex business problems. Shulman and Camacho are both musicians who used to jam together in their Kensho days. At Kensho, the foursome worked on a transcription technology for capturing public companies' earnings calls, a tricky task given the combination of poor audio quality, abundant jargon, and various accents.

Along the way, Shulman and his colleagues fell in love with the unexplored possibilities of AI audio. In AI research, he says, "audio in general is so far behind images and text. There's so much that we learn from the text community and how these models work and how they scale."

The same interests could have led Suno's founders to a very different place. Though they always intended to end up with a music product, their earliest brainstorming included an idea for a hearing aid and even the possibility of finding malfunctioning machinery through audio analysis. Instead, their first release was a text-to-speech program called Bark. When they surveyed early Bark users, it became clear that what they really wanted was a music generator. "So we started to run some initial experiments, and they seemed promising," Shulman says.

Suno uses the same general approach as large language models like ChatGPT. But audio, particularly music, is almost unfathomably more complex, which is why, as recently as last year, AI-music experts told ROLLING STONE that a service as capable as Suno's might take years to arrive. "Audio is not a discrete thing like words," Shulman says. "It's a wave. It's a continuous signal." High-quality audio's sampling rate is generally 44khz or 48hz, which means "48,000 tokens a second," he adds. "That's a big problem, right? And so you need to figure out how to kind of smoosh that down to something more reasonable." How, though? "A lot of work, a lot of heuristics, a lot of other kinds of tricks and models and stuff like that.



I don't think we're anywhere close to done." Eventually, Suno wants to move past the text-to-music interface, and onto more advanced and intuitive inputs – generating songs based on users' own singing is one idea.

OpenAI faces lawsuits over ChatGPT's use of books, news articles, and other copyrighted material in its vast corpus of training data. Suno's founders decline to reveal details of just what data they're shoveling into their own model, other than the fact that its ability to generate convincing human vocals comes in part because it's learning from recordings of speech, in addition to music. "Naked speech will help you learn the characteristics of human voice that are difficult," Shulman says.

One of Suno's earliest investors is Antonio Rodriquez, a partner at the venture-capital firm Matrix. Rodriquez had only funded one previous music venture, the music-categorization firm EchoNest, which was purchased by Spotify to fuel its algorithm. With Suno, Rodriquez got involved before it was even clear what the product would be. "I backed the team," says Rodriquez, who exudes the confidence of a man who's made more than his share of successful bets. "I'd known the team, and I'd especially known Mikey, and so I would have backed him to do almost anything that was legal. He's that creative."

Rodriquez is investing in Suno with the full knowledge that labels and publishers could sue, which he sees as "the risk we had to underwrite when we invested in the company, because we're the fat wallet that will get sued right behind these guys.... Honestly, if we had deals with labels when this company got started, I probably wouldn't have invested in it. I think that they needed to make this product without the constraints." (A spokesperson for Universal Music Group, which has taken an aggressive stance on AI, didn't return a request for comment.)

Suno says it's in communication with the major labels, and professes respect for artists and intellectual property – its tool won't allow you to request any specific artists' styles in your prompts, and doesn't use real artists' voices. The founders evince none of the open hostility to the music business that characterized, say, Napster before the lawsuits that destroyed it. "It doesn't mean we're not going to get sued, by the way," Rodriquez adds. "It just means that we're not going to have, like, a fuck-the-police kind of attitude."

Rodriquez sees Suno as a radically capable and easy-to-use musical instrument, and believes it could bring music making to everyone much the way camera phones and Instagram democratized

"We're trying to get a billion people much more engaged with music than they are now," says Suno AI co-founder Mikey Shulman. "We're not trying to replace artists."

photography. The idea, he says, is to once again "move the bar on the number of people that are allowed to be creators of stuff as opposed to consumers of stuff on the internet." He and the founders dare to suggest that Suno could attract a user base bigger than Spotify's. If that prospect is hard to get your head around, that's a good thing, Rodriquez says: It only means it's "seemingly stupid" in the exact way that tends to attract him as an investor. "All of our great companies have that combination of excellent talent," he says, "and then something that just seems stupid until it's so obvious that it's not stupid."

Well before Suno's arrival, musicians, producers, and songwriters were vocally concerned about AI's business-shaking potential. "Music, as made by humans driven by extraordinary circumstances ... those who have suffered and struggled to advance their craft, will have to contend with the wholesale automation of the very dear-bought art they have fought to achieve," Reid writes. But Suno's founders claim there's little to fear: They use the metaphor that people still read despite having the ability to write. "The way we think about this is we're trying to get a billion people much more engaged with music than they are now," Shulman says. "If people are much more into music, much more focused on creating, developing much more distinct tastes, this is obviously good for artists. The vision that we have of the future of music is one where it's artist-friendly. We're not trying to replace artists."

Though Suno is hyperfocused only on reaching music fans who want to create songs for fun, it could still end up causing significant disruption along the way. In the short term, the segment of the market for human creators that seems most directly endangered is a lucrative one: songs created for ads and even TV shows. Lucas Keller, founder of the management firm Milk and Honey, notes that the market for placing well-known songs will remain unaffected. "But in terms of the rest of it, yeah, it could definitely put a dent in their business," he says. "I think that ultimately, it allows a lot of ad agencies, film studios, networks, etc., to not have to go license stuff."

In the absence of strict rules against AI-created content, there's also the prospect of a world where users of models like Suno's flood streaming services with their robo-creations by the millions. "Spotify may one day say 'You can't do that,'" Shulman says, noting that so far Suno users seem more interested in just texting their songs to a few friends.

Suno's biggest potential competitor so far seems to be Google's Dream Track, which has obtained licenses that allow users to make their own songs using famous voices like Charlie Puth's via a similar prompt-based interface. But Dream Track has only been released to a tiny test user base, and the samples released so far aren't nearly as impressive-sounding as Suno's, despite the famous voices attached. "I just don't think that, like, making new Billy Joel songs is how people want to interact with music with the help of AI in the future," Shulman says. "If I think about how we actually want people doing music in five years, it's stuff that doesn't exist. It's the stuff that's in their head."

the future of underground rap is extremely online

TikTok infamy is just the tip of the iceberg for three teenagers at the vanguard of today's hip-hop

BY HATTIE LINDERT
ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE THOMPSON

BY THE TIME YOU FIGURE out where a song by New York rapper and producer Xaviersobased is coming from, it's usually already over. On 2021's "115 & LSD," which the 20-year-old cites as a creative breakthrough in his music, he builds up a cacophony of exotic-bird whistles, overlapping hums, overheard yells, exploding machine-gun shells, and blown-out 808s across just two minutes. Xavier's songs often repeat halfway through at double speed; his voice tumbles through verses about twerking and trapping and blunt toking and Xbox. "On My Own," from his recent mixtape *Keep It Goin Xav,* turns raw feedback into the bass below a never-quite-conclusive loop of beeps, the deep tones and danceable hi-hats forming an atmosphere as casual as it is intricate.

Xavier has established himself as the eyes and ears of a movement bubbling through two other teenage talents: the soulful Alabama warbler YhapoJJ, 20, who favors a hazy, trap-influenced sound and gothic image crafted with help from an online artist friend based in the Czech Republic; and fresh-faced firebrand Nettspend, 16, whose foxish European features are usually half-concealed under a swoop of ice-blond hair that recalls spiritual ancestor Justin Bieber as much as rock god Kurt Cobain. Xavier, Yhap, and Nett have been posited as the event horizon of so-called mumble rap, and the first chairs in a rowdy orchestra of new SoundCloud-born heroes somewhere between the likes of Lil Uzi Vert and the late Lil Peep.

Although their music crams in plenty of Gen Z-beckoning references – SpongeBob and *Twilight* and Photo Booth selfies of tweens with heat-straightened hair – none of these artists are making music exclusively for kids. Just look at the all-ages mix of attention they get, from terminally online kids cutting together videos with their music, scrupulous A&Rs with the right For You pages, and *New York Times* writers clued into this phenomenon alike. But the music has an undeniable hold on a younger demographic, often playing a role in helping teens, however crudely, process a world that can be extremely bleak. One of Xavier's most popular TikTok snippets blew up when it became the song du jour for a trend called the "fent stance," where users assumed the buckled pose all too familiar these days as an effect of the deadly synthetic drug supercharging the modern opioid epidemic. Funny it isn't; plainly indicative of modern coping mechanisms toward societal ills, it is.

Xavier, who began producing before he settled on his hypnotic flow, finds the bones of his beats everywhere – from Windows power-up noises to snippets of hubbub he catches on city streets. As a producer, he's gifted at giving his laid-back tales a feeling of drama: a song about a vibrator crescendos euphoric layers of piano worthy of any blockbuster-romance kiss. He says he tends to work spontaneously, something Yhap and Nett each echo. Nett likes to pull up the production software Bandlab wherever he is, so he can "go to town" without losing momentum. "Instead of thinking of it and writing it down," Xavier expands, "I'll think of it and do it."

"We found each other through this thing called the internet."

Many of the trio's songs have gone viral on TikTok, the app of choice for a post-internet generation accustomed to a world where seconds-long videos can loop forever. The passing head rush of popular sounds like Xavier's "patchmade," Yhap's "JJETLAGG," and Nett's "We not like you" sets the scene for skate tricks, fit pics, and front-camera goofing. A few scrolls down, the videos lean even further into shitpost modernism: vividly fried smash cuts of the rappers dancing at shows or on Instagram Live interwoven with dance duets with AI roaches and Roblox streams.

It is all extremely online, and both Xavier and Yhap say they don't see a huge difference between finding a kindred spirit via DM or in person, as long as they're able to catch the right vibe through a well-placed sample or killer meme. Sometimes, the invisible string of the activity-based algorithm is exactly what makes the right collaborator feel like a stroke of magic. "It's like, I don't know you and you don't know me, but we found each other through this thing called the internet. And now we're making music together that our fans love," Yhap says. "It's a great feeling."

Born and raised on the Upper West Side, Xavier is quicker to call his music "New York shit" than any of the various subgenres it's been categorized under online. His family has been in the city since the 1970s, when his mom's side emigrated from the Dominican Republic. Xavier and his older brother, Alexander, will be visiting later this year to walk her down the aisle when she weds her partner of 12 years, Indhira.

Xavier's mom, Evelyn, began working as a house DJ in the 1980s, spinning smooth electronic blends of techno and popular rap for decades at parties throughout Manhattan. That meant there was production software on the family computer from the time Xavier could reach the mouse. Sitting around a table of fajitas on the Lower East Side with Indhira and Xavier, Evelyn pulls up a home movie on Facebook that depicts two of Xavier's cousins leaning up against a table stacked with her decks, rapping into corded microphones. A six-year-old Xavier bobs in and out of frame, twisting his head, hands, and shoulders with focus, far less interested in showboating than riding his own wave. She recalls being confused by a song Xavier said inspired him to make music because the vocalist wasn't rapping on beat. "That's what's cool about it," she remembers him explaining.

YhapoJJ grew up in Huntsville, Alabama, a childhood soundtracked by his mother's curated mix of Toni Braxton, Tracy Chapman, Rich Homie Quan, and Young Thug. But more than anything, it was the way Queen's Freddie Mercury could conduct a roaring crowd that made him want to try music himself at age 15. While he says he only freestyles off the dome, not writing ahead of time doesn't mean he's not thoughtful about his subdued yet sonorous style. His most streamed song, "1o," is a soft and fuzzy loop dotted with laughs and cheers, as he muses softly "I got my blunt, and I'm right next to you (I'm writin' this to you)."

Last December, at Yhap's first performance with Xavier, in New York, eager fans overran the venue, scaling fire escapes and breaking apart a full-body metal detector before the show was called off, then revived at a Lower East Side skate park. The chaos of his concerts lives in the blogosphere history books now. It was also around the same time Xavier introduced Yhap to Nett's music. Amid a sea of imitation rage rappers and post-hyperpop monotony, something stood out to Xavier about the Richmond, Virginia, teenager's demon-spawn stylings.

Nettspend leans into a troublemaking "badass kid" persona, jumping on beds and spraying red wine all over the sheets in the music video for his incendiary guns-blazing anthem "2024 Freestyle." Still, Nett says he doesn't really want to be bad. He has three siblings, but felt isolated in school, like "everyone else was in one corner, and I was in another corner." He loved Future, Michael Jackson, and, yes, Bieber growing up, and first tried out rapping in the fifth grade. He quit high school after his freshman year, starting to seriously pursue music after a friend noted Nett was actually pretty nice with it.

His entire brief career, Nett has worked from anywhere; he recorded his breakout hit, "drankdrankdrank," in about 10 minutes while seated in his mom's car in their driveway. (As he explained in a recent interview, he "wasn't tryna be loud in the crib.") But "what they say," the 90-second song that got him a manager, came together even quicker. On the track, needle-sharp cheers overlap with thick, blunt-edged 808s firing at different levels as Nett raps from a lonely perch at the club. "What they say" swaddles the ear so naturally that when the beat abruptly kicks into double-time halfway through, the switch hits like an authoritative finger snapped right between the eyes. Even the name Nettspend happened in an instant. He just needed a SoundCloud handle to post what he'd been working on, and quickly thought of the internet. That being said, he does have some loose long-term plans: "We're gonna take over." After we reschedule an initial interview, I see via an Instagram Story that the conflict was because of a meetup with Chief Keef.

The transition to being public figures can be shaky for all three artists, especially this fast. Nett, who posts and deletes on social media at an even brisker clip than he uploads and takes down music, finds the internet downright "scary," especially once it starts to feed on your hype. "Right now, I can only have people around me that are genuine and that I trust," he says. These days, Yhap is looking for the same thing, and says he often turns to Xavier to talk about the stress of the industry. "Sometimes I feel the pressure, but then I'm like, 'Shit, I'm with Xav, and he's feeling it too,' " he says. While many of his fans mingle largely on social media, Yhap struggles with social anxiety and is careful about reading comments online.

Much of the fast-and-loose trajectories of their careers feels like somewhat of a blur to Xavier and Nett, but their 30-year-old manager Rennessy, who's worked with underground artists like SpaceGhostPurrp since 2014, holds certain memories close. On his birthday in early July 2022, a few days after running into Xavier and some friends skating in Riverside Park, he found them sharing a stacked lineup at a show only accessible by coordinates eager-enough attendees could access by messaging a certain Instagram account.

At those coordinates, Xavier's whole crew performed under the light of the moon for a raucous mob as fireworks exploded overhead. Feeling the force of the audience, dancing hard enough to conjure a phantom earthquake, Rennessy didn't know exactly what he was watching, but it looked like the future. He hit up Xavier immediately after. Behind the virality or streaming numbers or follower counts, there are always hordes of irrepressible young people looking for a late-night thrill.

PHOTOGRAPHS IN ILLUSTRATION BY SACHA LECCA (XAVIERSOBASED); KEVIN MOON (NETTSPEND); AND RYO SATO (YHAPOJJ)

THE UNCANCELLABLE TRISHA PAYTAS

SHE MADE A NAME AS THE INTERNET'S BIGGEST TROLL. ARE THOSE DAYS FINALLY BEHIND HER? BY EJ DICKSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CORINNE SCHIAVONE

TRISHA PAYTAS is telling me about the last time she got yelled at on the internet. ★ It was after a Halloween episode of her podcast, *Just Trish,* in which the influencer and YouTuber dressed as her then-obsession, the Weeknd in the HBO series *The Idol*. Wearing pale-pink hospital scrubs, a fake soul patch, and a do-rag, Paytas argued to her co-host, Oscar Gracey, that being a "full-time stay-at-home parent is 10 times harder than someone who can leave." She referred to the nonparenting labor of working moms as "a break." ★ The backlash was vicious. "People were like, 'Well, I would love to be a stay-at-home mom, plus I work 12 hours a day being a nurse, then I have to go home,' " Paytas says as we sit at her dining-room table in her expansive Conejo Valley, California, mansion, her one-year-old daughter, Malibu, babbling in the next room over. The floor is littered with the general detritus of parenting – diaper boxes, unopened Amazon packages, tiny hot-pink Crocs. A few hours earlier, I'd watched a TikTok of her in full Mob-wife regalia, her blond hair in a Carmela Soprano updo and her lips perfectly lined, but today she's in leggings and a long-sleeve white T-shirt, which stretches over her five-months pregnant belly. ★ "I wasn't trying to take away from working moms, because I'm a working mom," she says. "I was just trying to defend stay-at-home moms because to be with your child 24 hours a day would be really, really hard." ★ At first, I emphatically agree with this statement (as a mother myself, I know it to be objectively true). But the more I think about it, the more Paytas' explanation

strikes me as less than plausible. Anyone who has spent more than two seconds on the internet knows that delving into the working-versus-stay-at-home mom debate is one of the most surefire ways to get canceled, and that's not even to mention the fact that Paytas, a white woman, made this comment while dressed as the Weeknd. A few years ago, she would have likely doubled down, making a half-dozen follow-up videos while alienating a few more demographics for good measure. This time, however, she did something truly shocking: She conceded she had been wrong.

"Truly, cancellations always teach you something," she explains. "You're always like, 'What did I do that was wrong or fucked up?' So I've been thankful."

It's hard to overstate just how weird it is to hear this from Trisha Paytas.

For more than 15 years, Paytas, 35, has established a brand as one of the most divisive trolls in YouTube history, building a career off her blond-bimbo persona, her high-profile relationships with tabloid fixtures, and beefs with former friends like Shane Dawson and Jeffree Starr. Above all else, however, it's been Paytas' willingness to say and do virtually anything for views that has led to her being canceled more times than streamers have axed minor superhero franchises. Her controversies are as multitudinous as there are stars in the sky: She has been canceled for coming out as transgender (she is not), for rapping the n-word, for adopting an Asian accent to announce a new J-pop-star persona, for jokingly self-identifying as a chicken nugget. She skewered her own capacity to infuriate with a 2020 TikTok in which she dressed as Cleopatra and lip-synced to Steve Martin's parody song "King Tut," with the caption: "Will prob delete. Prob offensive."

Paytas is hyperconscious of the fact that she has said and done a lot of things that have hurt people. Though she attributes some of this to her much-publicized struggles with substance abuse and mental illness – she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD), a condition characterized by impulsivity and mood swings, in 2019 – she acknowledges that much of it stemmed from her desire to get money and attention. "I'm definitely not the person to be like, 'I don't know why I got canceled,' " she says. "I get it. I get why brands don't want to work with me. I've said crazy stuff for attention, for money. I took the trolling so far."

Within the YouTuber ecosystem, this is not unusual; what is somewhat unique, however, is how resilient Paytas has been in the face of multiple cancellations, akin to the old joke about only Cher and the cockroaches surviving a nuclear apocalypse.

Since getting sober, marrying the Israeli-born artist Moses Hacmon, and becoming a mother, Paytas has pulled off probably the most shocking move of her entire career: The people who used to follow her out of sheer morbid curiosity have become genuine fans. Her comments sections on TikTok and YouTube, which used to be replete with people imploring her to kill herself, are now filled with "Yassses" and "Mothers" and "We can't help but stans." Fans who have watched her over the years seem genuinely moved by her trajectory from self-described "mess" to (seemingly, at least) reformed troll.

"She knows that she's not entitled for people to forgive her, or love her, or watch her," says Gracey, her longtime friend and *Just Trish* podcast co-host. "She knows that she has to work. She really pushes herself to be open to new ideas [and] to change her opinions on things."

"WITH SOCIAL MEDIA, I'VE NEVER BEEN THE POPULAR GIRL. I'M NOT REALLY AN OUTCAST. I THINK I'M LITERALLY THE PERSON WHO'S JUST THERE."

There are some issues with Paytas' redemptive arc – namely, that many other creators who are more marginalized than she, and have pissed off far fewer people, would likely not be granted as many resurrections. I also question the degree to which marriage and motherhood can really make someone a better person (other than perhaps making one more tolerant of infants on planes).

But being saved by the stability of a family is precisely how Paytas sees it. Having spent her entire life not believing she was worthy of anything more than making people mad on YouTube, being loved has given her a renewed sense of insight and purpose. "I know they say you shouldn't change for a person or a person can't save you, but I believe [Moses] did," she says. "I was a mess when I met him. I drove to his house so many times high and stood naked on his porch, threatened to kill myself. I was just a really not-well person. But for some reason he just really loved me. And I just thought, 'If this person loves me this much, I should probably try to love myself.' "

PAYTAS HAS ALWAYS BEEN OBSESSED with fame. Growing up in Illinois, she fantasized about becoming a child star, like the Olsen twins in *Full House*; as a teenager, she transitioned to worshiping Playboy models. She loved musical theater and auditioned for her high school productions, despite having little vocal or acting talent. "I loved the attention, feeling like a star," she says. "[But] I was always extra and background." This is why, she says, she started doing elaborate re-creations of music videos once she became an influencer: "Because I always wanted to be the lead."

To get attention, she would tell various lies, like that she was a twin, or engaged at 14. "I don't know why I did it. Either to make myself more interesting, or to distract from the fact that my life wasn't interesting," she says. "I just wanted people to be interested in me. And it kind of manifested into actual crazy shit happening to me."

Around 2006, Paytas moved to California to try to forge a career in entertainment. Because Paytas was blond and curvaceous, she largely booked walk-on bimbo roles. In a 2011 episode of *Modern Family,* she had a nonspeaking part as a party guest with implants (which was ironic, she says, because she didn't get fake breasts until the following year); and in a 2013 episode of *Nathan for You,* she appeared as an object of fixation for a boob-obsessed security guard.

At the time, Paytas found the objectification validating. "I'd always told myself, 'I'll be famous if I can only lose a few pounds,' " she says. "[So] I was like, 'Wow, people want me to be a sexy person.' " Part of her lore is that around this time she also dabbled in sex work, starting out with being "a hooker on Santa Monica Boulevard for $5 blow jobs," as she puts it, then dancing at strip clubs and charging $5,000 for a weekend date as an escort. Paytas has talked openly and frequently about it, and while she says she had her share of harrowing moments – "On a podcast, I said I was kidnapped [by clients] 40 times," she says, "but it was, like, four" – she found some value in it. "To have sex with guys – which I would have done for free, for validation – to charge $5,000 for it? It just felt like, 'Wow, I'm worth something.' "

Around the same time, she was dating a string of what she refers to as "D-list" celebrities, including, she claims, the Tony Award-winning actor Roger Bart, whom she classifies as her first love. "I was en-

Senior writer EJ DICKSON *wrote about rapper and social media creator Lil Tay for the December issue.*

HAIR BY TONY IBARRA. MAKEUP BY ARIANNA GARCIA. OUTFIT BY FASHION NOVA.

amored," she says. "I thought we were gonna get married, have babies." She soon discovered, she says, that she had been Bart's "side chick." (A rep for Bart didn't respond to ROLLING STONE's request for comment.) This was another thing she enjoyed about escorting: She felt the clients respected her more than the men she dated.

"They would offer something like, 'Oh, you can come to this premiere with me,' " she says. But that "[always] fell through. So I respected the people who just paid and didn't promise things."

IN MANY RESPECTS, YOUTUBE, which Paytas joined two years after its advent in 2005, was the perfect platform for people just like her: those thriving off attention, who were not quite conventionally talented enough to pursue careers in mainstream entertainment. Her early channel is a capsule of a Hollywood aspirant's quest for fame, with her throwing things at the wall to see what sticks: In one video, she raps Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby," while in another, she tries out a corny routine for the NBC reality show *Last Comic Standing*. "With YouTube or social media, I've never been the popular girl," she says. "I'm not really an outcast. I think I'm literally the person who's just there."

This may have been true at the start of her career, but it changed in the early 2010s, when Paytas started making content with other misfit vloggers, such as OG YouTubers Shane Dawson and Drew Monson, resulting in an explosion of views. "They all grew up with childhood trauma, feeling like they didn't belong," says Gracey. "But then when they got together, it's funny – they kind of became the quote-unquote cool people on YouTube."

At this point, Paytas had zeroed in on the secret to online attention: "Pissing people off ... I wanted to be Howard Stern so bad. I wanted to be Andy Kaufman so bad," she says. "There's times where I truly did not mean to offend, and there's times where I was just trying to be offensive. And I kind of just regret ... all of it."

Much of what Paytas said on camera in those early years, she says, was intended to be inflammatory, such as the time she said women should stay in the kitchen washing carrots (which she took from a Kaufman monologue), or when she questioned whether dogs had brains. At other times, she claims, she was not educated enough to understand context, like when she came out as transgender, saying she didn't have the language at the time to refer to herself as nonbinary (for a while, she used they/them pronouns; now, she prefers she/her). On another occasion, Paytas diagnosed herself with dissociative identity disorder (DID), introducing her various "alters" and inflaming the mental-health community. "I really didn't see anything wrong with it until I saw the internet telling me this is bad," she says.

Gracey says Paytas sincerely believed she suffered from DID at the time, only lapsing into trolling as a defense mechanism after getting backlash. "She was like, 'No one's going to take me seriously, no one believes me,' " he says. "And I think she got reckless."

This has been a pattern in Paytas' career, yielding something of a Cassandra effect: Even when she is being genuine, her propensity for trolling has led people to question her motives. "It's hard to figure out what is authentic and what is Trisha playing a hyper-Trisha version of Trisha," says Gracey.

That's essentially what happened when she came out against David Dobrik, the head of the YouTuber collective known as the Vlog Squad, after dating one of the group's members, Jason Nash. The relationship was rocky, and the constant teasing and pranking within the group made it worse. "I don't think I'd ever had anyone else claiming me as a girlfriend before," she says. "But looking back, that person did not like me at all." Nash would joke on camera about sleeping with other women and criticize Paytas' eating habits, exacerbating her body-image issues and making her, as Gracey puts it, "question her worth." (Nash and Dobrik didn't respond to requests for comment.)

When the relationship ended – Paytas claims Dobrik forced Nash to dump her after she and Dobrik's friendship soured – Paytas had a genuine mental-health emergency. She was institutionalized three times in 2019, and developed an addiction to painkillers. She also hung out with Aaron Carter, with whom, she claims, she would do drugs between hospital visits. "He was just a really nice person," she says. "[With addicts] there's so many struggles and so much pain, but they're just nice people who don't want to hurt anyone." She says they kept in touch right up until he died in 2023, drowning while high on inhalants and generic Xanax.

Paytas' erratic behavior during that time would be used by Vlog Squad fans as ammunition against her when she accused Dobrik and the group of exploitative behavior, in 2019. Paytas felt less than vindicated when Dobrik was later accused of facilitating unsafe work conditions in 2021. "I talked about David for so long until other people came forward," she says. "I think I just lost credibility, and people don't listen to what I have to say. Or they're just like, 'Trisha lies.' " (Dobrik has since apologized, telling ROLLING STONE in 2021 that people getting hurt in his videos "could've been so avoided.")

That same year, Paytas embarked on a turning point for her career: the podcast *Frenemies,* co-hosted by fellow legacy YouTuber Ethan Klein. Paytas and Klein had a contentious relationship in the past; with *Frenemies,* however, the two appeared to reach a detente, and it racked up millions of listeners before abruptly and somewhat mysteriously ending in 2021. *Frenemies* is the one topic in our nearly three-and-a-half-hour conversation that she declines to discuss, but it's clear that the fallout still deeply wounds her. "I [don't know what I would have done] if I did not have Moses," she says.

This is the one net positive that arose from *Frenemies*: It introduced Paytas to her husband, Moses Hacmon, whose sister Hila is married to Klein. Hacmon is a constant presence both in Paytas' online persona – he frequently appears on her podcast and in her videos, participating in elaborate couples' cosplays and Paytas' trademark fast-food mukbangs – and during our interview; the whole time, he sits in the adjoining kitchen, patiently feeding Malibu.

Hacmon strikes me as highly protective of Paytas, which Gracey confirms. "She constantly lives in fear of the pendulum swinging. She always is worried about something: Like, 'Oh, God, am I gonna get demonetized? Am I gonna be blacklisted?' She has big fears about everything collapsing," he says. "But he's so calming and reassuring." Their dynamic makes even more sense when Paytas talks about her life around the time she met Hacmon. "I was so combative. I was so defensive. I was just so unhinged," she says. She became consumed with the fear of embarrassing him, and later, when she got pregnant, embarrassing their daughter. "I was like, I have to be able to control myself. And that I've never been able to do before." [*Cont. on 79*]

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE YOUNG, LIKE ANNA NICOLE SMITH. SO I'M THANKFUL TO SHOW THE JOURNEY OF BEING UNWELL TO BEING BETTER."

FORTUNATE SON

FERGIE CHAMBERS IS THE HEIR TO ONE OF AMERICA'S RICHEST FAMILIES, AND A 'PROFESSIONAL REVOLUTIONARY' DETERMINED TO SEE THE U.S. FALL

BY DAVID PEISNER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHEDLY BEN IBRAHIM

Chambers moved to Tunis, Tunisia, late last year, and has no immediate plans to return.

AROUND 8 A.M. on a cool, clear Monday in mid-November, James Cox Chambers Jr. is in Gresham Park, in southeast Atlanta, bouncing on the balls of his feet, shadowboxing the air in front of him. Dressed in a black hoodie with a Palestinian flag on it, black sweatpants, black New Balances, black-and-red work gloves, a white-and-black keffiyeh, with a balaclava ski mask perched on his head, Chambers is surrounded by a growing crowd. But at that moment, focused on his warmup routine, he looks very much alone.

Paige Belanger joins him on the grass, and for a few minutes, they practice arm drags, a move Chambers picked up in mixed-martial-arts training. Belanger is a member of the Babochki Collective, a group Chambers recently formed to help turn the vast fortune he's inherited into a socialist revolution.

"Just remember, you want to go out and away," he tells her. "It's a good tactic for de-arresting yourself."

The contingent in the park, which will grow to more than 500 people, is preparing to march to the construction site where the city is clear-cutting an urban forest to build a controversial police training center its detractors have dubbed "Cop City." The movement to stop it has been growing for more than two years and has catalyzed different wings of the progressive left – environmentalists, social-justice crusaders, police abolitionists – into a loosely unified front. Chambers, who most people know as Fergie or Jim, has considered himself a communist since his teenage years and has been on the front line of many left-wing demonstrations over the past decade. A month earlier, he'd locked himself to the front door of an Israeli weapons manufacturer in Cambridge, Massachusetts; three weeks later, he was arrested for defacing a McDonald's at a pro-Palestine rally in Washington, D.C. This protest, though, is more personal.

Alex Taylor, who has been a chief fundraiser for Cop City, is Chambers' first cousin. Taylor is the CEO of Cox Enterprises, a sprawling, multibillion-dollar conglomerate whose varied tentacles include the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* Axios.com, Kelley Blue Book, and dozens of radio and TV stations. It's also the country's largest private broadband provider. The company, which was founded by Chambers' great-grandfather, James M. Cox, the former governor of Ohio and the Democratic presidential nominee in 1920, has made the extended Cox clan the 10th-richest family in America, with a net worth of around $26.8 billion, according to *Forbes*. The 39-year-old Chambers owned a percentage of Cox, and received quarterly dividends until mid-2023, when after years of growing estrangement – some of it political, much of it not – he broke with the family over their Cop City support. A deal was reached for Cox to buy his shares. The exact terms are shrouded in nondisclosure agreements, but the result isn't: In the past year, Chambers has gone from being an angsty political radical with a few million dollars at his disposal to one who's in the process of extracting at least $250 million from Cox, which he's committed to using to build socialist and anti-imperialist infrastructure.

"We need a revolution," Chambers tells me. He sees himself as a "professional revolutionary": "I see success as the dissolution of the United States government and an end to the U.S. empire. Because I say that a lot, combined with the money, makes me a target."

As we prepare to set off on a nearly two-mile march toward the Cop City site, the vibe in the park is very much a ragtag army division gearing up for combat. Organizers distribute goggles and face masks. Protesters check and recheck their equipment. Some have fashioned makeshift shields from plastic lunch trays. A small brass band plays "When the Saints Go Marching In." Helicopters circle overhead.

Chambers is a ball of energy, bobbing his head, raising his fist, and chanting along with the crowd: "No justice! No peace! No racist-ass police!"

"There's a level of gratitude I have to even end up here," he tells me. "Because I shouldn't be in this group. Most people like me wouldn't."

The long line of protesters snakes down a paved trail through the woods. Chambers walks alongside Belanger and Calla Walsh, another Babochki member. As we climb a hill, Chambers leans toward me.

"My favorite Fred Hampton quote says, 'I believe I'm going to die doing the things I was born to do. I believe I'm going to die high off the people,' " he says. "I love that idea, dying high off the people." He motions to the marchers around him. " 'High off the people' – that's what this feels like."

The march turns onto a roadway, when the overwhelming law-enforcement presence becomes visible: at least a dozen police vehicles, alongside dozens of officers, wearing armor and helmets, carrying heavy weaponry. As a police SUV rolls alongside the marchers, blaring its siren, Chambers dances in front of it, shooting his middle finger at the driver. One of the march's organizers wheels a large speaker blasting Bone Crusher's early-aughts crunk anthem "Never Scared," as the scrum edges toward a line of riot police about 50 yards away. Calls rise from the crowd: "Stay together!" "Let's fucking go!"

Chambers links arms with Walsh and Belanger and inches toward the front. As the first line of marchers reaches the police, it's chaos. Officers batter protesters with plastic shields, and noxious plumes rise from the street where tear-gas canisters have been deployed. I struggle to put on a pair of protective glasses. The formation breaks apart, and people scatter, coughing, sputtering, and yelling.

"Fuck!"

"Don't run!"

"Medic!"

"We need help right here!"

As some marchers scramble into a nearby patch of woods, a flash-bang goes off. More panic.

"Is someone shooting?"

"Is anyone hit?"

In the woods, some gasp for air, others rinse their eyes with water. I find Walsh. She looks dazed. Then I find Chambers. He looks invigorated.

"I got blasted right in the face!" he says. "It was spicy!" We make our way back to the larger group of protesters. Chambers is still buzzing. "Man, that was good."

A LOT OF PEOPLE don't like Fergie Chambers, and it's not that hard to understand why. Let's start with this: He's a stinking-rich white guy who has never needed to work a day in his life, yet he feels comfortable inveighing against the horrors of capitalism and declaring his solidarity with the world's dispossessed. He does this while posting photos on social media of himself globe-trotting with model-actress Stella Schnabel, his partner and the mother of the youngest of his four children. Schnabel, it's worth noting, is the daughter of Julian Schnabel, one of the world's most famous artists and the director of several films. None of it exactly screams "man of the people."

"WE NEED A REVOLUTION," SAYS COX HEIR FERGIE CHAMBERS. "I SEE SUCCESS AS THE DISSOLUTION OF THE UNITED STATES AND AN END TO THE U.S. EMPIRE."

Many of Chambers' geopolitical positions are broadly contentious, and he appears to take glee rubbing them in people's faces. He supports Russia's war on Ukraine, and frequently refers to Vladimir Putin as "a great man." In 2022, he traveled to the Donbas region to write about ethnic Russians in the area who welcomed Russia's military presence. Since Hamas' attack on Israel on Oct. 7, Chambers has focused his attention on the Palestinian cause and repeatedly praised the militant group. He has dismissed reports of sexual violence and the targeting of civilians during the attack as Zionist propaganda, and made incendiary remarks on social media regarding the ongoing conflict ("We need to make people who support Israel actually afraid to go out in public").

Even putting toxic politics and class contradictions aside, there's this: Chambers can be kind of a dick. He often speaks in proclamations, as if every word were the gospel truth and any who disagree are beneath contempt. He talks of the things he hates – Zionists, liberals, his dad, etc. – with fiery passion, and casually refers to people and organizations as "enemies" he's "at war" with, this despite some of those people and organizations having been his allies in the

Writer DAVID PEISNER *covers music and politics, and is based in Decatur, Georgia.*

THEN AND NOW Clockwise from left: Chambers marching with protesters at Cop City in Atlanta; participating in a direct action with the group Palestine Action last fall; with his grandmother, who was an ambassador to Belgium.

recent past. He's often at odds even with those who broadly agree with his politics.

There's another side of Chambers though. He can be charming, charismatic, and funny. He's whip-smart and earnest. He's given considerable sums of money to organizations like the Black Alliance for Peace, the Abolitionist Law Center, and the Middle East Children's Alliance, as well as a host of leftist media projects and bail funds. He's an obscenely wealthy person committed to dismantling the system that enabled people like him to become obscenely wealthy.

"He's a person that has been broken by this system in a different way than most of us and is trying to pick up the pieces, find meaning, and push the world to be more just," says Tim Franzen, a community organizer who has known Chambers for nearly a decade.

Chambers' grandmother Anne Cox Chambers was the ambassador to Belgium during the Carter administration, and a longtime force in Democratic politics, but she operated largely in the shadows. "The more anonymous you can be, the better," she said in a rare 1991 interview with *Fortune*. "Why then, you can do just whatever you want."

Chambers, who was close with his grandmother until her death in 2020, doesn't heed this advice. "There's something to be said for generating momentum with visibility or challenging norms by doing something you're not supposed to, visibly, and being unafraid of that," he says.

If you find Chambers' politics loathsome, it's easy to demonize him as a radical left-wing boogeyman – a sort of dirtbag George Soros – or dismiss him entirely. To his haters, he's nothing but a spoiled, attention-seeking rich kid with a massive Oedipus complex, a thing for Karl Marx, a bunch of guns, and a need to prove his ardor by being the most extreme guy in any room. But if you glimpse some righteousness in his crusade and recognize he's committing serious resources to causes that have never dared dream of this kind of money, then the question of what to make of Fergie Chambers is thornier.

WHEN CHAMBERS was in his early twenties, he lived in Brooklyn for a spell with his first wife, Anya, a Russian woman he met while they were students at Bard College. They'd just had their first child together, a son, and Chambers invited friends over to see the baby and play pickup football in a nearby park. While they played, a car hit a kitten and kept driving. Chambers and his friends discovered the animal, writhing on the ground. The person who told me this story, a longtime friend of Chambers who asked not to be named out of fear it could attract state repression, was there that day and said everyone seemed paralyzed, unsure what to do.

"Finally, Fergie was like, 'I got it,'" he tells me. Then, according to this friend, Chambers ran the cat over again with his own car, putting it out of his misery. "It really does speak to the fact that when there's something difficult but necessary, Fergie's able to step up. Many people will not do the uncomfortable thing. Most are going to call the police or the ASPCA, and the cat would've been suffering the entire time, whereas in a matter of minutes, decisive action was taken that nobody else was willing to do."

When I relay this tale to Chambers, he says it's not completely true. He didn't run over the kitten. "I slit its throat," he says.

Chambers' childhood was turbulent. He grew up mostly in Brooklyn. His parents divorced when he was young, and he lived with his mother, Lauren Hamilton, an actress and artist. It was a privileged upbringing, but he wasn't habitually cocooned in the world of the super rich the way that he was when visiting his father, James Cox Chambers, or his dad's family.

Chambers was a precocious child who could read and write before kindergarten and skipped second grade. He enrolled at the Saint Ann's School, a progressive, private institution whose former students include Lena Dunham, Jemima Kirke, and Mike D of the Beastie Boys. "It was the school for famous people's children," says Schnabel, who also attended.

Chambers had a penchant for acting out in school. A close friend of his tells me his first memory of Chambers was watching him smash a violin over his own head in front of the school in fourth grade.

Chambers' mother took him to a psychiatrist for the first time when he was six. In addition to his behavior issues, he was still wetting his bed. "There

FROM LEFT: DAVID PEISNER; COURTESY OF FERGIE CHAMBERS, 2

was a calendar with marks on it, and I'd get a prize, but if I pissed my bed, it was this big wave of shame and the whole day was clouded with that," he recalls. In addition to weekly therapy, he was eventually medicated.

"Then, when I'm 12, I'd have tantrums," he says. "I'd freak out. I'd talk about being depressed." He says he was sent to the psych ward at a local hospital: "That was the first time I was put in a straitjacket, sedated, and left in a room for a day." He also alleges he was raped by another patient there.

When he was released, he began drinking and smoking weed. Within a few years, he was shooting heroin. Throughout his teenage years, he says, he was involuntarily committed to psychiatric institutions at least a half-dozen times. On multiple occasions, he says, he was taken from his home and transported to out-of-state therapy programs. At 15, after shooting heroin and smoking angel dust, he attempted suicide by swallowing what he calls "a ton of pills." When friends called 911 and first responders arrived, Chambers ran and was chased by police. When they caught up with him, he spit in an officer's face and was detained. "They had their way with me," he says. "I was thrown in an ambulance, and went back into an institution." It wasn't his first encounter with police, but it was foundational.

Throughout these years, Chambers underwent a political awakening. He knew his family had money, but it wasn't until a classmate brought in a magazine listing America's wealthiest families that he had any idea how much. He remembers a teacher assigning Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and prodding him to take note of Zinn's critique of capitalism. Soon, he was reading Lenin and Marx and calling himself a communist.

Chambers believes his political turn impacted his adolescent mental-health treatment. He's come to reject all of the various diagnoses doctors tagged him with. "I don't believe in the biological existence of personality disorders," he says. "Things like bipolar, borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety, PTSD, they're conditions based on the society we live in. In a secular, capitalist world, this psychiatric framework is the most effective form of social control. I was expressing dissenting political ideas when I was a kid. Antisocial personality disorder is characterized by having extreme beliefs. Extreme in reference to what? Who defines that?"

Chambers believes his mental-health traumas also drove a wedge between him and his mother. "She definitely loved me and showed affection, but her reaction to my distress was so severe that it started to make things incredibly difficult," he says. "I shut her off emotionally. Then, in my first and second marriage, she'd intervene and try to convince my partner I was bipolar and needed help and medication. I told her, 'Look, we can have a relationship, but discussions of my mental health and you intervening in my relationships is off the table. These are hard boundaries.' " He says that after his mother reached out to Schnabel to reiterate these concerns, he stopped talking to her entirely. (Hamilton did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Chambers' relationship with his father is even more complicated. The elder Chambers, a co-owner of the Atlanta Hawks and chair of the board of trustees at Bard College, runs an organic farm in Hillsdale, New York. According to Chambers, his father "spent most of my childhood taking drugs in California and ignoring me." (Chambers Sr. did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

For a time, during Chambers' teenage years, his dad moved to Manhattan, and lived in an apartment where he kept pet wolves. Chambers describes his father as the family's original black sheep and credits him as the person who first taught him to hate cops and distrust the wealthy. But after his father got remarried in 2004 to actress Nabila Khashoggi, the daughter of billionaire Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi, he believes his father's politics softened, straining an already fraught relationship.

When Chambers' youngest son was born in 2021, he says, his father never visited him. As he began publicly criticizing capitalism in general and his family specifically, relations between father and son grew "super icy," Chambers says. "I asked to go visit my grandmother's old house in France for my birthday, and he said no." The final breaking point was Chambers' trip to Ukraine. "There's nothing I could've done worse than what I did, which was, in his mind, propaganda for Putin," he says. As Chambers sees it, the relationship is irreconcilable. "We hate each other. My father is a bad man."

Chambers says those who'd reduce his anti-capitalist crusade to an extended Oedipal tantrum are missing the point. "It's a symptom of liberal idealism that people want to psychoanalyze everything and invalidate it based on that," he says. "Yes, I have daddy issues and that informs my politics. My dad is emblematic of everything wrong with capitalist society. As a result, it has helped me develop political analyses. Life experience informs what we become. This is the case for every single human being on Earth."

Chambers' socialism isn't a mild "Bernie Bro" vision of expanded social-welfare programs and stronger labor unions. He identifies as a Marxist-Leninist. He lionizes Stalin and Mao and has tattoos of both on his thigh. He believes in fostering a culture of leftist militancy and owns several guns. "So long as our enemies control the state, gun control means a furtherance of their monopoly on the legitimate use of force," he says as several Babochki members nod in agreement. "I'm not organizing militias to attack the state. We're talking about people's self-defense. Because we don't know what's going to come our way."

Chambers doesn't really believe in incremental reform. For him, things like socialized medicine or housing subsidies are usually just tools to prop up liberal politicians and a broken capitalist system. "If I'm able to generate a mass movement around people who want better access to health care and education, more protections for workers, and I'm willing to do this based on an economy built on imperialism, then I've gotten close to some revolutionary ideas but actually done nothing revolutionary at all," he says.

"YOU DON'T POST IMAGES OF YOURSELF BREAKING LAWS," SAYS COMMUNITY ORGANIZER TAI LEE. "IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE THE MONEY GUY, YOU SHOULD BE LOW-KEY."

BABOCHKI MEANS "butterflies" in Russian, so I assumed Chambers' collective was named for "the butterfly effect," the way small actions can reverberate across vast distances. In fact, it's a nod to a jujitsu move that uses an aggressor's strength against them. Chambers formed the Babochki Collective to help him allocate the windfall from the Cox deal, but the group also serves as an all-purpose advisory council. The dozen or so members include people Chambers has known since childhood, along with some he's only recently met. When I visit him outside of Enfield, New Hampshire, in early November, most of the Babochki members are there for a three-day retreat.

One night, we gather for dinner in a large, sparsely furnished house at the top of a hill. Chambers purchased the place a few months earlier, but has been living less than a mile up the road. Platters of steak, lamb, roasted potatoes, and spinach are shuttled from the kitchen to the dining-room table and passed around. As members finish the meal, Chambers lingers at the table, in black-framed glasses and a Boston Bruins hat, nursing a glass of red wine and smoking a blunt. His sweatshirt sleeves are hiked up, revealing tattooed forearms. Despite an obsessive workout routine, Chambers isn't a particularly big guy. At the table though, he exerts a gravitational pull. He tends to slow his speech and occasionally close his eyes when he's straining to make a complicated point or losing patience with someone for not getting it.

So, it can only be revolution or bust?

"It is revolution or bust," he says, leaning back in his chair. "That's how history unfolds."

Franzen, the Atlanta-based organizer, finds Chambers' radical activism commendable, but says he's prone to very black-and-white thinking: "It's harder to think incrementalism is the enemy when people count on the incremental to eat."

Chambers' outsize wealth ensures his outsize opinions have outsize influence. He consistently shrugs off the notion that he's the leader of any movement, but as Kamau Franklin, who runs Community Movement Builders, a Black-led nonprofit that works on issues of police violence and sustainability and to which Chambers has given multiple grants, puts it, "Because of the resources he has, whether people like it or not – whether I like it or not – he's deferred to by certain people who are looking to bring him in closer in order to get those resources."

This isn't simply opportunism. The Babochki members I meet seem sharp and dedicated. Most were involved in socialist organizing long before Chambers and his money came along. But several of them live rent-free on his property. Sitting around the table, I ask: Who can tell Chambers when he's wrong? The room gets quiet for a few seconds. Then, after a few moments of back-and-forth, Chambers takes a long drag from his blunt.

A NEW START Chambers recently married model and actress Stella Schnabel, and the two are living in Tunisia.

"It doesn't matter as long as I'm right," he says. Everyone laughs, except for Chambers. "It doesn't. So, they're here to make sure I'm right."

One person who challenges Chambers, at least occasionally, is Schnabel. She's tall, statuesque, and at times, formidable. "This is a very valid question," she says. "You're never going to build a huge party having issues with every single-ass person you ever meet."

Chambers and Schnabel have known each other since Saint Ann's, but weren't close until they reconnected in 2020. "Stella's the only rich person I've ever been close with in my life," he tells me later. "Any other woman I've been with, there's an inherent power dynamic I can't really escape. With her, it's different. I have a lot more money than she does, but she doesn't need it."

Ever since the Cox buyout, Chambers has been inundated with grant requests, but many leftists have criticized how he's disbursed his money.

"Where are the free community health clinics? Where are the community schools?" asks Matthew Hunter, an L.A.-based organizer with CPUSA, the country's official Communist Party. "On the left, we idolize the Black Panthers and what they were able to do. Then I see Fergie, and to me, it all looks like a vanity project. Because if it was real, if it was socialist, there's so much he can do to build infrastructure to support people. None of that's happening."

Chambers isn't against these sorts of programs. "But lots of rich people give money to things like that," he says. "I see my role as resourcing explicitly political things that aren't getting resourced. We don't want a society built on charity."

CHEDLY BEN IBRAHIM

ON A SPRAWLING patch of land about an hour southeast of Atlanta, outside of Madison, Georgia, Chambers conducted his first experiment in communal living. At the time, back in 2017, he and his second wife, Cameron, had recently returned from spending the winter months camped at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, protesting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. During their time there, increasingly heavy-handed tactics were used to dislodge activists from the protest camp.

As the camp disbanded, Chambers was fired up by the idea of living more connected to the land and creating a haven for activists or those seeking refuge from state repression. He bought property in Georgia, and moved there with his wife and another couple they'd met at Standing Rock. At first, they lived in tents on the land, but gradually the commune expanded. Chambers invited more people, bought neighboring properties, including one with a luxury log cabin on it, and brought three tiny houses to the property. At its peak, more than a dozen people lived for free on the compound, most of whom were collecting a $2,000-a-month stipend from Chambers for their work there, which included farming, raising livestock, and political study. Nearly everyone I spoke to who was there says it didn't go well, though untangling what exactly happened and why depends on who you ask.

Ron Pushak moved to the compound at the invitation of his ex-wife, who was living there with their young son and her new boyfriend. He says many there arrived traumatized. "Everyone kind of had shell shock from Standing Rock. These people needed professional help. They didn't need to be left in the woods with a few bucks in their pockets and no jobs."

On the commune, substance abuse was rampant. Booze and weed were ubiquitous, and psychedelics commonplace. Chambers, says Pushak, "was seeking a shamanistic path of healing and trying to prescribe that to other people as well."

Chambers arranged for several members of the commune to visit the Peyote Way Church of God in Willcox, Arizona, during this period. As Chambers tells me, "I thought psychedelics would show you things in a way that I don't now."

Amanda Lee, who lived there off and on with her son, was alarmed. "I don't feel like I'm going to be in a better place in my life if I'm doing tons of hallucinogenics," she says. "They called it microdosing, but they were not always 'micro' doses. They felt like, 'This is the only way not to be bipolar,' or whatever. Everything was trial and error there, from farming to microdosing. The learning process was slow and brutal."

For a stretch of time, Chambers was living in the property's largest, nicest house with Cameron and another woman he knew from Atlanta, Rachael. Pushak, who'd grown close with Chambers, also lived in the house, and described the women as Chambers' "two wives." "They weren't officially married, but they all went to the peyote church and were together after that," he says.

Rachael had initially been inspired by Chambers' vision for the commune. "He wanted us to be able to live not having to be slaves of capitalism," she says. After moving there, her relationship with Chambers and his wife shifted. "He was in a marriage with Cam. Things weren't going well. They were also open to polyamory. So that was a piece of it." (Cameron declined to comment.) Others I spoke to say there was an effort to spread the polyamorous vibe. "He wanted to do this whole swinger place," Lee [*Cont. on 80*]

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Reviews

Music

THE BLACK KEYS STRIKE MELLOW GOLD

Pals like Beck and Noel Gallagher help the garage-rock duo make one of their best LPs

By JON DOLAN

The Black Keys
Ohio Players
NONESUCH

FOR THEIR 12TH ALBUM, the Black Keys have reset their clock with a project they'd first considered almost 20 years ago. In the early 2000s, when Dan Auerbach and Patrick Carney were first hustling their way out of Akron, Ohio, they toured as an opener for Beck. They hit it off so well that the fledgling garage-rock duo and the alt-rock elder decided to make an album together sometime. In a sense, the excellent new *Ohio Players* is the long-ripening fruit of that idea. It's the Keys' most collaborative album, which is saying something for a band that has worked with everyone from classic-rock stars to rappers to Delta-blues worthies.

Beck appears on half of the album's tracks, along with friends and peers like →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Sonia Kretschmar

THE BLACK KEYS

Noel Gallagher, indie-rap innovator Dan "the Automator" Nakamura, and superstar pop producer Greg Kurstin (who was Beck's touring keyboard player back in the day). Opening track "This Is Nowhere" finds a perfect middle ground between the Keys' deep-bottom Rust Belt boogie grind and the laid-back boom-bap Beck perfected on his 1996 classic, *Odelay*.

They keep the Nineties feels coming on the sterling Beck co-write "Beautiful People (Stay High)," with its euphorically baggy Happy Mondays/Primal Scream shuffle, as well as on "Paper Crown," which features a lead vocal from Beck and a guest rap verse from Memphis hip-hop legend Juicy J of Three Six Mafia, evoking the utopian peak of alt-rock/hip-hop crossover. Elsewhere, "On the Game," featuring a guitar solo and backing vocals from Gallagher, is an epic blast of Brit-pop holiness.

The Keys say they wanted to re-create the feel of their "record hangs," parties they've hosted in cities all over the world, where they spin classic 45s. Whether they set their retro-rock wayback machine to Memphis in the Sixties, the Midwest in the Seventies, or Manchester, England, and L.A. in the Nineties, it all flows together like a beautifully paced DJ set. That doesn't mean the album simply defaults to creating a vibe; this is arguably the sharpest collection of songs the Keys have come up with. "Don't Let Me Go" locks into a slinky chug, then lifts off toward falsetto-soul heaven. Gallagher appears again to throw down some Waterloo-sunburst guitar majesty on the soaring highlight "Only Love Matters." If you're looking for classic-Keys blues revivalism, there's the gritty "Please Me Til I'm Satisfied," and they deliver top-shelf crate digging with a sweet cover of the 1968 William Bell/Booker T. Jones ballad "I Forgot to Be Your Lover."

In many ways, *Ohio Players* imagines what the Keys might have sounded like had they been born into the eclectic mid- to late-Nineties that Beck ruled rather than the minimalist rock-is-back early-2000s. It was a period when every genre – indie rock, hip-hop, trip-hop, rave, and exotica – melted into mellow gold. That era isn't as mythic as the Mississippi Delta or a weed-fogged Seventies arena show. But it's a little closer to Auerbach and Carney's lived experience, and on *Ohio Players*, they're at home in every groove.

SIR'S PRICKLY GROWING PAINS

A gifted R&B artist delivers alluring but obscure confessions By MANKAPRR CONTEH

SiR
Heavy
TDE

SIR'S STATELY croon exudes grown-and-sexy. The Inglewood, California, R&B singer-songwriter's style is careful and studied, influenced by the timelessness of Stevie Wonder and John Mayer's sensitive edge. His 2019 release, *Chasing Summer,* was a gauzy yarn that still holds up in the field of modern R&B. With its bounce and levity, the LP balanced odes to good weed, chasing

skirts, and the city he loves with fleeting explorations of discomfort. He had a jazzy attitude in a landscape that skewed pop, establishing himself as an artist with a texture all his own. He stood as a man in control.

Nearly five years later, his latest album, *Heavy,* comes with a bevy of admissions that SiR, in fact, has had a lot of growing to do. Even as he's honed what's become a hallmark sound, his inner turmoil spills into the world around him, and he spends the album trying to trace its paths. When talking about *Heavy* in 2022, he suggested that it comes from becoming a better husband, a father, and a mentally healthier person. You can hear these obligations pulling him toward the light. "You make me wanna be a better man," he sings on the smitten single "Nothing Even Matters," which he's said is the best song he's ever made about his wife.

"Nothing Even Matters" is nestled toward the end of the track list, which sees SiR go from carefree ne'er-do-well to hopeless fuck-up to man-in-progress. That he can't quite figure out how to quit bad habits like benders and breaking hearts makes the album both uneasy, and – as he asserts in one of the album's best songs – "Only Human."

SiR is at his best on *Heavy* when he can complement his arsenal of classic production – funky bass lines, regal horns, boom-bap drums, his own heavenly harmony stacks, and his signature smoky guitars – with empathetic songwriting that builds out the lives of people who matter to one another. However, the songs' strong moods can often be more communicative than their lyrics; he can conjure an internal battle, but the forces he's up against are less well-drawn, leaving you to wonder why he's struggling so much to be faithful and accountable. "No Evil" oozes discontent, with vocal contortions from SiR that are new and haunting, but it's also tough to parse, an incoherent swirl of mythological and celebrity tropes.

This lack of clarity can be a common obstacle between artist and audience when musicians class a project as being particularly vulnerable, as SiR has with this one. Yet, while *Heavy* lacks the depth of storytelling that might've crystallized his stakes to strangers, it's a solid showing of his undeniable style.

BREAKING

Bnny's Brokenhearted Brilliance

JESSICA VISCIUS, the Chicago indie singer-songwriter who records as Bnny, has described her excellent second LP, *One Million Love Songs,* as "having fun with a broken heart." Viscius' songs are direct and uncomplicated, shifting from heavy guitars to soft ballads, the work of an artist who can create an entire snow-globe-like world in just under two minutes. Whether she's singing about loving after loss, trying (and failing) to outrun the past, or placing yourself in the perilous position of getting hurt again, and again, and again ... Viscius explores every emotion without shame. **LEAH LU**

FROM TOP: RO.LEXX; ALEXA VISCIUS

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[*Cont. from 44*] Webster's phone says a lot about her. A baseball card of Ronald Acuña Jr., a star outfielder for the Braves, is tucked into the back of its transparent case (she chronicled her crush in 2021's "A Dream With a Baseball Player"). Her screen's background is a sepia-toned illustration of skeletons from the fantasy game Warhammer. And dangling from her device are three miniature classic Pokémon: Pikachu, Ditto, and Poliwag. (She used to have Pokémon cards listed on her tour rider, but received so many she had to switch to V-Bucks, the *Fortnite* currency.)

At my request, Webster opens an app to show me her actual eBay purchase history. It's a chaotic collection of toys (her words), including vintage figurines of Nerdlucks (Michael Jordan's enemies in *Space Jam,* a.k.a. the Monstars), a giant *Despicable Me* Minion, and Scannerz, a bizarre handheld device that lets you scan bar codes. Most twentysomethings spend their days on social media, but Webster prefers to bid on the cultural artifacts of her childhood. Suddenly, she points to a recent sale and melts as if she's showing me a newborn puppy. "Oh, my gosh!" she says. "I got this really cute *Wallace & Gromit* letter holder!"

WEBSTER MAY BE fixated with cartoon ephemera, but *Underdressed at the Symphony* is a strikingly sincere record, one that chronicles a painful breakup. Webster wrote it following her split from the rapper Boothlord, her boyfriend of four years. "It didn't happen just once," she says of the breakup. "It was such a long process that it took that long to cope with, to get strong enough to be like, 'This isn't good for me.' "

She cites the intimate "But Not Kiss" ("I want to see you in my dreams but then forget/We're meant to be but not yet") as an "anti-romantic" love song. "I remember writing it and being like, 'I wish this song was written for me. I wish I didn't have to write it,' " she says. "I couldn't find what I was looking for, so I said it myself."

On the title track, she confronts her anguish over the breakup head-on ("I know you haven't told your mother yet/'Cause she invited me over again"), mulling heartache over slow-burning instrumentation that includes a snippet of an actual symphony. If that wasn't literal enough, she spells it out in a later verse: "I'm underdressed at the symphony/Crying to songs/That you put me on."

Webster actually did this, frequenting the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as a way to heal from the breakup. It became a compulsion, deciding to attend at the last minute and feeling a rush of euphoria as she drove the 15 minutes from her house, worrying she wouldn't have time to park. Naturally, she never gave herself enough time to dress appropriately.

Alone yet surrounded by the crowd, she felt at ease. Each trip was a different experience: the night she watched a 21-year-old play Beethoven; that Christmas show where she wore a fleece vest while everyone else wore formal attire. "I found it therapeutic," she says. "Nobody knows me, I don't know anybody. I don't know what I'm listening to half the time. When I was really going through a hard time, I was like, 'Oh, is there a show tonight?' "

Webster recorded *Symphony* at Sonic Ranch Studios in Tornillo, Texas, near the U.S.-Mexico border. It marked the first time Webster recorded outside of her home state, a noteworthy break from her usual if-it-ain't-broke, don't-fix-it mentality. "My engineer [Drew Vandenberg] was like, 'Want to try something new?' And I was like, 'Not really,' " she says with a laugh.

The band cut the album over nine days, recording live in the room, often doing just three takes of a song and choosing the best one. "Every song has a repeating riff, there's not really any solos," says Stoessel. "Once we find the bed of the song, what we started calling 'the ride,' then it's ready."

Cline recorded his parts remotely from his home in upstate New York, while Webster cut her vocals on GarageBand in her kitchen back in Atlanta. It's her preferred method of recording her voice, which isn't surprising for a self-described homebody. When I ask her what her perfect day looks like, she simply says "Being at home." She loves to play her Nintendo devices, like the Switch and DS (the latter in cobalt blue, her favorite color), and her new iPad mini (she jokes that she even uses it with the Apple Pencil). All things considered, it's kind of surprising she's not a stoner.

"I'm so sober," she says, though she does have the occasional glass of wine. "Yachty posted a video of me and Tyler [the Creator], and there's just millions of comments that say 'She's so stoned.' They didn't even care that the three of us were in a room together. They were just like, 'She's high out of her mind!' I'm like, 'I was just smiling! I'm not a smoker!' "

THERE ARE MUSICAL roots in Webster's family. Her grandfather was a bluegrass guitarist; her oldest brother, Jack, inspired her to pick up the guitar, while her other brother, Luke, works on all of her graphic design. She met Yachty at Inman Middle School in Atlanta. "It was in eighth grade in the cafeteria, at an open house before the semester started," the rapper tells ROLLING STONE. "I was introduced to her by a mutual friend, and we've been friends ever since." Later, when Webster began photographing rappers around Atlanta, Yachty was one of her first subjects.

Webster self-released her first album, *Run and Tell,* when she was 16. She never questioned pursuing music full time; it hadn't occurred to her to do anything else. "When everyone was graduating high school and starting [their] lives, I was like, 'Oh, this is all I've done, so how do I do that?' " she recalls.

She moved to Nashville to study songwriting at Belmont University, but was so homesick she'd drive back to Atlanta most weekends. Back home, she'd hang out with her friends in the hip-hop collective Awful, which coalesced around a label of the same name. She began to feel like school was a waste of time. After moving back home, she signed with Awful in 2017 and dropped her self-titled second album. "I've never been a part of such a close collective," she says. "It wasn't just music – it was a sense of family. It was almost like music was last."

When Webster and I spoke in 2019, she said being a white woman on a hip-hop label made her feel like an outlier. When I mention it now, she shrugs. "I definitely feel like that was a thing people talked about," she says. Yachty has a different take: "I didn't find it weird, because this is Atlanta. The hipster scene meshed pretty hard, because Atlanta is so small. It plays a part in every artist's music who originates from the city."

Webster is often recognized in Atlanta, but she says it doesn't bother her. It's everything else about fame she finds overwhelming, like how she comes off in interviews or how many of them she does. "I avoid thinking about it," she says. "I'm not built for it. It freaks me out."

Without even realizing it, Webster is quoting the new *Symphony* track "Wanna Quit All the Time," where she sings, "I wanna quit all the time/I think about it all the time/It's the attention that freaks me out." Across all five albums, in a catalog of autobiographical songs, it stands out as the most honest and most vulnerable moment in her career.

Webster's fame started to increase following 2021's *I Know I'm Funny Haha*, when some of her older songs began to go viral on TikTok, like "I Know You" and "Kingston." There are clips of her lyrics featuring her sped-up vocals that have received millions of views; in one TikTok, a fan is sobbing uncontrollably during her set. Last fall, when Cline joined her onstage for "In a Good Way" in Chicago, he realized how much her audience had grown. "Opening for Wilco, a lot of people probably dug her, and she's only playing for half an hour," Cline says. "Two years later, a whole other thing has happened. I didn't really do a demographic survey that night, but it was mostly all these screaming young women."

"I've always thought it's really important that people see me as a regular guy," Webster says. "I think a lot of the anxiety and the tension I feel is because I am a regular guy, and when people idolize me, it makes me uncomfortable, because I don't even idolize myself. I'm glad people can relate to me. What they relate to the most are my lyrics, and I'm like, 'I'm sure you have some thoughts that I would love to hear, too. I'm sure there's some stuff you're thinking that is just as genius.' You know what I mean?"

"Faye and I have talked about this so many times," Yachty says. "I think she does a pretty good job of maintaining her freedom. There's only so much you can do. It's the unfortunate reality of this career. The bigger you get, the more successful, but the farther away you are from a normal, private life."

For *Underdressed at the Symphony*, Webster has incorporated a few things to help minimize her anxiety: limiting press, keeping a strict no-camera rule on Zoom, and maintaining a safe distance from social media. She's also getting better at saying no. "My manager tells me that my whole career is that I just want to make cool stuff," she says. "Which can be frustrating for them. I'll pass on something that he doesn't want me to pass on, but then I'm like, 'Oh, but I'll go photograph [myself] playing a yo-yo for the whole day. Easy!' "

"She's out of step with the conversation, and I relate to that," says Tweedy. "There's certain things that are just not worth it. A lot of management and record companies and people in that world don't want to leave money on the table. And [Wilco's] decision-making, since the very beginning, was based on, 'What allows me to do this for the longest period of time?' Those decisions tend to run counter to driving yourself into the ground to just make sure you get every penny that's available to you at that moment. It can be frustrating for business people, but I think she'll come to those same conclusions."

Until then, Webster will continue to play tennis, finding local courts on tour. A couple of weeks after our hang, we have a last chat over Zoom (camera off, of course). She's calling from Melbourne, where she's about to tour through early February. She already went to see the women's final of the Australian Open.

"Touring can be really hard," she says. "I do a lot of fun things, even if that is tennis, to feel ... I don't know." She pauses, then breaks into a full-bellied laugh. "I'm still maneuvering this, if you can't tell."

[*Cont. from 50*] documentary about John Lennon (whom he has a habit of calling "Phil" – he's still new to the rock thing). He breathed in every moment of the Madonna concert he just saw in Brooklyn. And he tries to keep in mind what Drake told him over dinner not long ago: "Be fearless. Lean into the uncomfortability."

NO ONE IS pressuring Teezo to make a hit song right now. His management and label keep telling him that it can take years to break an artist, that he shouldn't force it, that there's plenty of time. But he's learned enough about the business that he can't quite believe it. "I'm still like, 'Nah, I've seen the documentaries. You want a hit, I know you do.' " Truth is, no one wants it more than the artist himself.

So right now, a few hours before taking the stage at Madison Square Garden, Teezo is in a midtown recording studio, trying to make it happen. "We're just looking for something hooky," he says. "Shamelessly! We're looking under the control board." His confidence is boosted at the moment by an outfit he feels good about: brand-new shiny-black down jacket over a black tank top, thick metal chain, mirrored wraparound shades. "When you put that on you, you feel different," he says. "I'm walking around the studio different. I'm in that mode. It helps the music."

On hand today is the producer and songwriter Jeremiah Raisen, a.k.a. Sadpony, who's at the heart of what may be a nascent rap-rock crossover movement. Among many other credits, he and his brother Justin were key forces on Lil Yachty's psych-rock departure, *Let's Start Here*. Dressed in a Balenciaga hoodie, a bumblebee-colored North Face jacket, and unlaced Timberlands, Raisen has a unique energy, somehow languid and caffeinated all at once. "Do you like the Clash, bro?" he'll ask a new acquaintance, out of nowhere.

Raisen, who definitely likes the Clash, has arrived at the session with a skittering, almost Gary Glitter-inspired track he made with help from a live guitarist and other musicians, which sounds a lot more like a full song sans vocals than a typical hip-hop beat. "It's the difference between a beat and a composition," Teezo says later. (Weirdly, Raisen grew up with Dan Nigro, the producer-songwriter who's bringing rock sounds into the mainstream from another angle with Olivia Rodrigo.) Also on board for the session today is the one-named producer Lukas, who worked with the Raisen brothers and Yachty on Drake's "Away From Home," and is aiming to branch out from hip-hop.

Teezo is learning how to collaborate in the studio, to be more like Prince with the Revolution than solo Prince, and to let go of his self-image as an MC who writes every word himself. He's not comfortable, though, with co-writers who try to dictate melodies to him or overtly change his sound. He had one like that the other week and ended up not saying a word the entire session. But he likes Raisen, and he's making a point of inviting lyrical ideas from everyone in the room, including his young A&R guy, Daniel Schultz, and even the journalist following him around. "A session like that is me showing, 'I want your lyric. Your melody might change all of our lives,' " Teezo says.

Even after a full album in what he refers to as his "rock & boom" style, Teezo still has a beginner's-mind approach, drawing on what he calls his "elementary" knowledge of rock. "I don't listen to alternative music," he says. "So that's where it gets annoying. It's like, I don't know – who am I making this music for? I guess I'll see you on tour." At the same time, he's trying to school himself. "I don't wanna just paint my nails and be like, 'Eh, I'm rock & roll.' "

He usually writes in a more traditionally hip-hop fashion, working from verse to chorus, but today, he wants to start with that hook. Pretty soon, he lands on one, injecting the phrase "It's none of your business" in between guitar chords, alongside some bratty "na na na na's." From there, he painstakingly crafts verses, in a vaguely Frank Ocean-like melodic flow, that seem to be about an overly inquisitive romantic partner. The track, it slowly emerges, is meant for the soundtrack for an upcoming kids' movie, a relatively rare opportunity for a big paycheck from a recording. By the end, Raisen is excited: "This song is just huge," he says.

Teezo is feeling good, too – he's made a potential hit without feeling compromised. "We're in on the pop joke," he says.

FOR AARON THOMAS, everything changed in July 2016. After a couple of unsuccessful stints at Prairie View A&M University, where he was more focused on partying, DJ'ing, and playing trombone in marching band than attending class, he had just settled in Houston. He landed a job in a restaurant there and was making beats, imagining a behind-the-scenes future in the music business. And he was in love with his girlfriend, who deeply believed in his talent.

One weekend that month, she headed to another city for a girls' trip, and never came back. A shooting broke out in the parking lot of a nightclub, and she was caught in the crossfire, a random victim. "Her friend calls me," he recalls, choking up. "I was like, 'Yo, what's up?' She said, 'You didn't hear?' She took a deep breath and said, 'She got shot last night.' She's like, 'Yeah, she died.' And it was so final."

Thomas was shattered. He thought about "being Batman," heading to the city in question – the name of which he'd prefer not to make public – and trying to get revenge. But instead, he decided to move home to Beaumont, Texas, and dedicate himself to his own music, which no one had supported harder than his girlfriend. He was embarrassed about leaving Houston, and kept his restaurant job there for a while. Sometimes that meant sleeping in a parking lot after his shifts to save the 85-mile trip back home.

In Beaumont, he started spending time in a studio called the White House, where he encountered both support and resentment in the local scene. His emo-influenced style – the skinny jeans, the occasional woman's top or pink bandanna – raised eyebrows. He pulls up a candid shot on his phone from that era: Teezo in a red sweatshirt and a red headband, his hair teased high, a crucifix dangling from one ear, and next to him, a more conventional-looking frenemy giving him comically obvious side-eye.

"They thought I was gay," Teezo says, with a shrug. "But I always had girls in my crib." In fact, while he's never been officially diagnosed, Teezo thinks he has a sex and porn addiction. "I've seen the damage it can cause, the mood swings," he says. "I want to love genuinely. I don't want it to be like a physical thing or whatever. I probably should seek treatment."

The "blatant disrespect" he faced on the local scene could get ugly. While he was hanging out in an SUV outside of another studio in town, someone threw a bottle at him.

But once he made "100 Guns" – which drew directly on his horror over his girlfriend's death – he was instantly bigger than Beaumont, getting national-press attention and co-signs from major artists. The rapper Trippie Redd became the first of his many famous fans, flying him out to L.A., and public support from Chance the Rapper and Tyler, the Creator – who featured him on his 2021 album, *Call Me If You Get Lost,* and brought him out on tour – soon followed.

Teezo doesn't mind admitting that he fully embraced the rock-leaning direction only because people responded to it. "The reason I went down that lane is because, honestly, it worked," he says. "I got the attention from the alternative thing. Maybe a week before, you know, I was still making rap songs. But that worked. And I just walked down that hall. Which I do a lot. I see what sticks."

EIGHT YEARS AFTER he first vowed to pursue his own music, Teezo Touchdown is onstage at Madison Square Garden, in the small corner of Travis Scott's massive stage he's allowed to use, telling the crowd to believe in themselves. "I want you to know something," he says, introducing a truncated version of his song "Impossible." "As long as your heart is beating, as long as you're alive, don't ever let anyone tell you your goals are impossible, your dreams are impossible. New York, I am living proof. All your goals are possible!"

As he rushes offstage, Teezo goes right past a group of concertgoers. They all clap for him, minus one guy. "You suck!" he shouts, adding a homophobic slur: "Fucking f----t." A fan chimes in with, "Teezo, I fucking love you." But it may be too late for the artist's mood. "We have these in-ears and it's muting almost everything," he says later. "But that right there – 'Boo! You suck!' – that cuts through. Probably because of my insecurities. Or maybe one part of me believes that – when I know that's not the case."

In an apparent effort to shake off that moment, Teezo declares it's time for a "merch run" – a spontaneous appearance at a T-shirt booth. We head up in an elevator, and it gets scary fast. Earlier the same day, he was able to visit Macy's to get polish for his grills without being recognized a single time, but it's a different story at an arena packed with nearly 20,000 kids who just saw him onstage. Teens start following him through the halls of the Garden, Pied Piper–style, and it's getting hard to move.

When he makes it to the booth, he's able to sign shirts for maybe four minutes before a security guard with a buzz cut shuts the whole thing down. Amid the chaos, though, it feels possible to believe it's all finally happening, that Drake and Chance and Scott know more than hecklers and hometown haters.

Back in the dressing room, Teezo is still in a pensive mood and keeps playing Prince's "All the Critics Love U in New York" over the dressing room's sound system. His struggles with self-belief, he muses, have a spiritual dimension. "Something in myself *is* telling me, 'You're not gonna do it,' " he says. " 'You hear that boo? You hear that "You suck"? They right.' But I think that's self-sabotage. It's good and evil. I think that's an attack on the good."

In the end, though, he doesn't really believe the worst voices in his head. He knows it's all just starting, even at age 31. "I could sit here and pout," he says. "I can take all of this off, wipe the glitter off and go apply to any one of these jobs that's hiring for the holiday season, and Teezo Touchdown is over."

But that's not the plan. "I can't stop right now," he says. "I've chosen to do this."

YOUNG MIKO

[*Cont. from 56*] text Karol G sent her because it was signed "Carolina." Later, Miko was curious enough to send a FaceTime request, wondering if it might be the real-life Karol G on the other side of the bubble. "It was dark in her room, but you could tell it was her from her voice," Miko says, imitating Karol's famous Medellín accent. During the tour, Karol G took Miko under her wing, inviting her to join her through warmups and soundchecks. "The Karol G internship was real," Miko jokes. The Colombian artist recently gave Miko another milestone on her résumé: playing Karol G's romantic interest in the music video for her Tiesto collaboration, "Contigo."

It all may be part of a day's work for her now, but none of it is lost on Miko. "Seeing these people and thinking they're superstars and brilliant," she says, "to suddenly they're my friends and we create together … This feels like a different life."

BEFORE SHE TOOK over urbano as Young Miko, it was María Victoria Ramírez de Arellano, known to her family and friends as Vicky, who first dreamed of a career as an artist. The only daughter in her family, Miko remembers her childhood as "very simple." She grew up in the northwestern town of Añasco, attending school in neighboring Mayagüez and playing soccer and other sports all over the west side of Puerto Rico.

Miko and her two brothers' parents were strict at home, but they always left room for indulging the trio. She remembers being at school with her younger brother and getting called to the principal's office, where she found her mom signing an exit slip with an expression that hinted at trouble. "Your dad's waiting for you in the car," Miko recalls her mom telling them. Later, when they all were in the car, her parents looked at each other with a mischievous smile: "We're going to the beach! The day is gorgeous!" "They knew someday we'd leave the house, so they wanted to enjoy us while we were there," she says.

Today, her two brothers are both in medicine, while she's a globe-trotting artist – a reality that she sees as befitting of their lifelong dynamic. "They'd be the ones getting good grades, and I'd be scraping by," she says. Yet they've always been among her biggest supporters. When Miko was first toying with the idea of getting into music, it was one of her brothers who convinced their mom to trust Miko with her plan. "She's excelled at everything she's done," Miko recalls her brother saying.

Miko's artistic dreams run deep. As a teenager, she loved writing poems at school, and later majored in drawing when she attended the University of Puerto Rico's Río Piedras campus. Her time there was short, after budget cuts forced her department to slash credits off her major, prompting her to transfer to the Inter American University in the southwestern town of San Germán.

The same year she transferred there, in 2017, Hurricane Maria slammed Puerto Rico, leaving archipelago-wide power outages that lasted months. In early 2020, the southwestern coast suffered through weekslong earthquakes that forced schools to temporarily close. A few months later, the pandemic hit. Miko felt like she was swimming against the current, a reality shared by many young Puerto Ricans as they try to navigate adulthood in a colony.

While Miko felt like giving up most of the time, her mom asked her to stick with school long enough to at least get a diploma. At the time, Miko's career as a tattoo artist was taking off, giving her money to fund studio time. "I told myself I'll get to 10,000 followers on Instagram and then I can go do music for real," she tells me, as she shows me the Instagram account on her phone. Her last post is dated July 2021. That same month she released "105 Freestyle," her debut track – kicking off a string of viral hits, including "Puerto Rican Mami" and the Villano Antillano collaboration "Vendetta," that made her one of the most-talked-about artists on Puerto Rico.

AS WE DRIVE through Piñones, Miko says she wants some fresh coconut water. Sofia and Kaly quickly spot a small shack along the road and take off to get some for her. Just before they get back in the car, two ATVs drive by blasting Miko's music. "That's the first time that's ever happened to me!" she says.

Later, it's time for some empanadillas, the greasy street delicacy that can be filled with anything under the culinary sun. (Miko prefers grouper or trunk fish.) She's trying to have one of those days that brings her back to her childhood at the beach, she tells me, even if actually making it to the beach is harder to pull off these days. "I can do it, but it'll turn into a meet-and-greet," she says. I'm reminded of her opening lyrics in "Bi," where she raps, "Because of my fame, I can't go out" – and that was two years ago, before she had amassed nearly 7 million followers on Instagram.

When we finally find a spot in Condado, a touristy neighborhood west of Piñones, she finds comfort in seeing the waves from the corner of a beachside restaurant instead of on the shore. "I'm a very independent person," she says. "So it's annoying to have to call Kaly and ask her if she can go get gas in my car. If I go to a drive-thru by myself, something can happen. Dumb shit like that is what I miss."

Miko recently started therapy to cope with the avalanche of changes in her life – playing in front of massive crowds and following a demanding schedule among them. She's been working through meditation and breathing exercises to calm her mind. She also travels with a team that includes some of her oldest friends: Kaly, whom she first met in college; her manager, Mariana, who quit her job to help Miko realize her artistic dreams; and her photographer, Joshua, who is also her longtime roommate. "The fact that I'm surrounded by them makes things easier," she says. Playing *Mario Kart* on the road helps, too. When I ask her what her winning combination on the Nintendo game is, she gets serious: "OK, I'm about to share some codes here. It's Inkling Girl, the one with pink hair and a motocross bike."

Though life in the spotlight may have stripped her of some freedoms, it's also gained her some luxuries close to her heart. Recently, she flew both of her parents first-class to attend her tour-closing concerts in Argentina, and planned a weeklong vacation for them in Buenos Aires, which Miko describes as her biggest achievement of 2023. As for days at the beach, she's more than happy trading them for boat trips around the coastline of Puerto Rico: "It's not like I can go to Piñones, but I can go to Palomino and lay on the sand," she says, naming a small island in the northeast that's a typical day trip for boaters. "I always manage to find the loopholes."

Later, we sit down for a meal at San Juan's Yoko restaurant, a famed Japanese food parlor with a celebrity clientele. Miko takes her time with the menu, a long list of Japanese-Puerto Rican fusion dishes that include pegaítos, a block of fried white rice topped with avocado and tuna that's one of her favorites.

Miko dreams of visiting Japan, and she often talks about it with Tainy, who's spent time there. Miko's love for anime, which she was first drawn to because of her older brother, is woven throughout her work. She recalls bonding with her brothers over *Avatar: The Last Airbender*: "I am who I am today because I grew up watching that show," she says. In "Puerto Rican Mami," she references Asami Sato, a character in the *Avatar* sequel *The Legend of Korra*, calling her a "bad bitch." Last year, Miko incorporated cherry blossom visuals into her shows to simulate a lush Japanese garden. She currently sports gray-blond hair, which, she says, is a reference to the *Hunter x Hunter* character Killua Zoldyck. "Anime is a world, and it makes me create a world in my project," she says.

Trap Kitty took listeners on a journey with Riri, a pole dancer working at a strip club in Puerto Rico, largely inspired by one of Miko's friends of the same name. We hear Riri gossiping backstage with her colleagues, sharing a smoke as they tell anecdotes of when they first had sex, and later taking the stage.

A few weeks after we meet, Miko will surprise fans with the news that her debut album, *att.*, is coming April 5. She's coy about sharing too many details during our interview, but she does tell me what excites her most about this project: "I opened my heart like never before."

As our conversation winds down, Miko's team starts talking over the schedule for the next few days. Although she's planning to pay a visit to her parents in Añasco today – a two-hour-minimum drive away – it's looking like a short one. After that, she'll get back to rehearsals for her first-ever Coachella set, something that's been at the top of her bucket list for years. She just didn't expect it to happen so fast. She also didn't think she'd be featured so high on the festival's lineup – just a line below Lana Del Rey – on her first round, a feat she now shares with fellow urbano heavyweights Karol G, Bad Bunny, and J Balvin.

But before her career explodes even more, Miko is happy spending time at home, where she retains a bit of her past life. She still shares the same roommate and apartment she's had since moving to "la metro," as she calls the San Juan area. Her neighbors have seen Miko go from being "Vicky" to being a global phenomenon, and yet they still ask her for help carrying the groceries from the car.

Puerto Rico as a whole feels like a safe haven from the madness of overnight fame. "Puerto Ricans are not star-struck," she says. "Puerto Rico is a celebrity island." And it's true: Where else can you find Bad Bunny in disguise, hanging out at the annual Fiestas de la Calle San Sebastián festival? "I feel very comfortable here," she adds. If she ever leaves Puerto Rico, New York – a hub that has served as a landing for generations of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora – is on her list.

Miko sips an Old-Fashioned as she cracks jokes with Kaly and Mariana. She's sitting in the eye of the hurricane, a brief moment of bliss before heading back to the grind of stardom. Yet when I ask her what her future looks like, it sounds a lot more like this ephemeral moment than the hustle she's constantly chasing. She says she wants to have people like Mariana, Joshua, and Kaly by her side; to keep coming back to Puerto Rico to be with her parents; and to be able to sit down to have a drink in peace.

"I like the woman that I'm becoming more and more," she says. "I think that's the biggest achievement in life."

TRISHA PAYTAS

[*Cont. from 65*] IN 2021, shortly after meeting Hacmon, she got sober and started dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), an intervention for those struggling with the mood swings and histrionic behavior that accompany BPD. "Everything that got me in trouble was just me lashing out," she says. "I would cry hysterically online, and people wouldn't take me seriously." With DBT, "I learned how to be the calm one. People listen to you a little bit better."

The public got its first glimpse of what a wiser, more mature Paytas might look like in late 2022, when she was pregnant with Malibu. After Queen Elizabeth II died, fans circulated a meme characterizing Paytas' as-yet-unborn baby as her reincarnated spirit. Rather than lean into it by, say, cosplaying a member of the royal family, Paytas took to TikTok to tell people to, in no uncertain terms, bugger off.

"I was so out of my trolling era, and I was in such a good space spiritually," she says. "The fact that my pregnancy got ruined by trolling – now, I guess, it's kind of funny and karmatic. But it just made me so upset." (Paytas didn't entirely avoid using the birth of her first child for content, however: Not long after Malibu was born, she posted a TikTok with her, titled "ASMR Singing to my Newborn in the Hospital.")

Paytas also had an opportunity to revert back to her old ways in mid-2023, when her friend Colleen Ballinger, best known as the YouTuber Miranda Sings, was accused of posting nudes of Paytas on a group text and mocking her. Rather than capitalize on the incident by, say, making a string of videos about a "feud," she made one video briefly addressing the alleged texts before cutting ties with Ballinger, saying, "I really do believe in protecting my peace and happiness." (Ballinger did not respond to a request for comment.)

While Paytas maintains that she is "held to a different cancellation standard" than others, she acknowledges she's been fortunate to reach "a good place" in her career. "People like me for me," she says. "I can just make money just being myself and not having to shock people." She sees herself as a cautionary tale for creators trapped in the endless cycle of trolling for eyeballs, then asking for forgiveness.

"I always thought I was going to die young, like Anna Nicole Smith," she says. "So I'm thankful to show the journey of being unwell to being better, because I think it is possible for people to change. And I'm happy to be that spokesperson." I ask Paytas if she feels she's truly grown up. "I always feel like a teen mom," she says. "But maturity-wise, in terms of just caring about my family, where little things just don't matter? Yes, I have."

A few weeks later, though, I come across a post on Paytas' X account. It's a quote-tweet announcing an upcoming K-drama on Netflix, about a girl who turns into a chicken nugget. "Where's my royalty check?" she wrote, including a screen grab from the infamous video where she self-identified as a chicken nugget.

So maybe the impulse to troll never quite dies – or, at the very least, can't be extinguished by anything as quotidian as marriage or motherhood. But I am fairly certain that if ever there is a nuclear apocalypse in L.A., the one thing we'll see before losing internet access is Trisha Paytas posting about it. Whatever she posts will prob be offensive. But she can always delete later.

PESO PLUMA

[*Cont. from 41*] after a while. I chuckle a little and ask him what he means. "I'm crazy. I'm not saying that as a joke," he continues seriously. "Mentally, I'm crazy – the ideas I have, the songs we do. But I think craziness is part of genius."

But crazy how? "I don't know how to explain it, I can't tell you," he says. Finally, he offers, "It's like a sickness we have. I say it's a sickness. All of us who are the big guys have it, and we don't even know it. And sometimes we're crazy, and that craziness makes us genuine and authentic. We're all crazy in different ways."

That craziness has been pulling Peso into all corners of the pop-culture world, even leading to offers in Hollywood: "I've had a lot of opportunities to make movies and TV shows, and big ones." But he's turned them down; he says he has a hard time sitting in one place and imagines he'd be impatient as people are changing camera lenses and setups. "Even in my videos, the directors already know that the most I'll stick around is three hours, maximum four. The people I'm collaborating with will sometimes stay later than me," he says. (He admits, a little shyly, that there's one other project he wouldn't mind pursuing: "I'd do *Narcos Mexico* if they do another season.")

As hectic as Peso's entry into fame has been the past year, his world really seems to move in fast-forward in February, following his Grammy win. His relationship with the Argentine singer Nicki Nicole ends publicly, and he cancels a headlining set in Viña del Mar, Chile. Then the tabloids run wild with a story about how he's checked himself into a mental-health/rehabilitation facility in Mexico.

In the middle of all the gossip, Peso shuts down the rumors, revealing that he's actually just been hanging out in the studio in California. "Well, the last few weeks have been really crazy," he tells me in early March, his voice light. "People are always going to have something to say about what I'm doing and creating their own narrative. But the reality is, all these days, I've been in the studio working on *Exodo*."

He catches me up on some other big moments that happened during the madness. The Grammy win, he says, was "surreal." "I never imagined that one day in my life I'd win a Grammy, especially representing my country and my culture and Mexican folklore and corridos." The Jay-Z encounter was just as surprising: "I was in shock, to be honest. I didn't know what to say. I started stuttering. I told him he was an inspiration and an idol. It was crazy to hear him turn around and look at me and say, 'Keep doing your thing.' It's something that stuck with me, and it's something I'm going to keep doing – the music I love."

He'd told me in L.A. he had one more dream he'd been kicking around: He's been in talks for a series about his life, something capturing how unbelievable, intense, and extraordinary his whole journey has been. He thinks this is something he'll do later in his career, but he's determined to see it through. "Dead or alive, I'm going to leave that finished," he promises.

That's just one dream he has for now. If the past year is any evidence, Peso will probably make it happen. But before he can share more, he has to get out of the van. He's been sitting still too long, and he needs to keep moving.

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[*Cont. from 71*] says. "He wanted to have free love. It was totally sex-oriented."

Chambers says he didn't consider both women his wives and refers to the arrangement as "a stupid 21st-century poly thing" that was first initiated when the three decided to take psilocybin together.

The relationship between Chambers and Cameron had long been volatile. In 2013, their Atlanta neighbors called the police after hearing the couple fighting, and Chambers was arrested for domestic battery and false imprisonment. He says that he was on a bender at the time – out of his mind on whiskey, cocaine, and Xanax – and has little memory of the incident. He was never prosecuted, but calls it "the single greatest stain on my entire existence so far, something that will haunt me for the rest of my life."

Their unstable dynamic added to the chaos in Madison. I was told about violence among other residents, guns being drawn, and at least one person being chased through the woods at gunpoint.

"It was fucking crazy," Pushak says. "There were issues with alcoholism everywhere. I think [Chambers] was healing from personal family trauma. He was juggling two women. Drugs were involved. We'd go to the bank to get $20,000 and hand everybody money each week. It was nuts."

Chambers wanted the compound to become self-sustaining but their fledgling efforts at farming didn't produce enough food for the group, and there were frequent tensions around buying additional provisions. Chambers would assign readings – usually historical texts or political tracts – to the group, but some would blow it off. "We're living in the woods while he's living in luxury talking about how having clean water and food isn't important if we're not reading about Marxism and having intellectual conversations about it," Lee says.

In early 2019, Chambers pulled the plug on the commune. People had been filtering out already, and there were issues with local law enforcement. Looking back now, Chambers admits he made mistakes. "Madison was fucked up," he says. "I thought if I threw all this land out there, got people together who wanted the system to stop, and threw resources at it, it would work. Nope. Things have to be organized. It was too open. It was like, 'We'll take anarchists, social democrats, anybody who's against this system.' That was not principled."

Still, Chambers believed in the potential of this sort of project. After selling the Madison property in early 2020, he bought land near Alford, Massachusetts, and made plans to do it differently there.

The Alford property, a collection of neighboring lots along a scenic two-lane road that twists through wooded hills, includes several homes along with a large barn that Chambers converted into the Berkshire People's Gym. When he first moved there, he was still trying to save his marriage. When it wasn't salvageable, he grew deeply depressed.

The Alford project, with its focus on farming, boxing, martial arts, and a group Chambers formed called the Berkshire Communists, helped occupy his mind. He reconnected with Schnabel during a trip to New York, and she moved to Alford. Belanger, the Babochki member who accompanied Chambers at the Cop City march, first met him around this time when she attended his gym classes and study groups. She later moved into a house on the property and led study groups. She knew vaguely about Chambers' family money, but once he completed the Cox deal last July, it became clear they could scale up this political project. "It seems crazy the amount we could do if we can strategize right," Belanger says.

The Alford venture hasn't been without drama. One person arrived with a plan to grow cannabis, but left a few weeks later following an arcane dispute about decolonial theory and the writings of Frantz Fanon and Gerald Horne. Another resident left the property for a couple of weeks to follow Phish on tour, then died when he either jumped or fell from a balcony at a show in San Francisco. Pushak, one of a few veterans of the Madison compound who moved to Alford, eventually fell out with Chambers. He looks back fondly on their friendship, but says Chambers just didn't like being challenged. "People are somewhat disposable to him," he says. "He can buy new friends. I feel like an asshole saying it, but it didn't feel that way until I was treated that way."

IN MID-2023, as the Cox deal was closing, Chambers moved his base of operations to New Hampshire. He planned to hang on to the spread in Alford, but New Hampshire had no state income tax, which meant he could maximize the money from the deal. When I visited him there in early November, he seemed to be following a similar road map he'd taken in Madison and Alford. He'd bought two homes on wooded properties and also acquired office space, part of which he was turning into an MMA gym.

Chambers calls these "land projects," and sees them as an important base for his work. "Any good movement had collective comrades working, breaking bread, living together," he says.

A week after the Cop City march in Atlanta, a group called Palestine Action, whose U.S. branch Chambers helped found after Oct. 7, staged a direct action at an office of Elbit Systems, an Israeli defense contractor, in Merrimack, New Hampshire. While several protesters held a banner outside, others spray-painted the building and climbed on the roof holding smoke bombs. Chambers was interviewed at the scene by a local news crew, and afterward, the Palestine Action U.S. social media accounts posted photos and video of the masked protesters in action. Three women, including Walsh, were arrested and charged with rioting, conspiracy to commit criminal mischief, burglary, and conspiracy to commit falsifying physical evidence. Each now faces the prospect of decades in prison if convicted. (Belanger was also later charged in the same incident.) There was speculation that Chambers could be slapped with RICO charges for his alleged role as an organizer and funder of the action.

The immediate reaction in leftist circles was harsh. Although many criticized the charges as excessive, Chambers was denounced as an "adventurist" who'd encouraged these women to undertake a poorly conceived protest, then recklessly broadcast it all over social media. Many pointed to a tweet of his from the previous month – "College student radicals should be diving headfirst into direct action. They have way less to lose re: families and jobs" – as evidence he was leading young activists down a road to ruin.

"When somebody is posting online, telling people, especially young people, 'Everyone get out there and wreck shit! You have nothing to lose,' that's very suspect to me," says Tai Lee, a Brooklyn-based communist organizer. "You don't post images of yourself breaking laws. This is wrecker behavior." Lee thinks Chambers' value to the movement as a funder comes with certain responsibilities: "If you're going to be the money guy, you should be low-key."

PRESCRIBED BURNS

[*Cont. from 31*] He shows me a culvert the Corps had dug out to divert flood waters, which it had coupled with building man-made dirt berms, or walls, to help further channel the flow.

As we stand on the side, Roger Romero passes by in his car. He slows down after spotting a friendly face. He knows Zebrowski – in fact, the idea for the construction I'm being shown came from Romero, and some of the dirt dropped on the spot is actually from his land.

Romero has a background in working with heavy equipment, and he'd been giving his number out to officials from all sorts of agencies for months. Zebrowski was his most successful stop; as for the rest of them, "I don't know if they've kept it," Romero jokes.

Having his suggestion heard was a bright spot in a year that's been otherwise difficult and demoralizing, he says. His home survived the fire, but his property did not make it out unscathed, and the damage to his fences and fields was compounded by the flooding. In November, not long after the fire and the floods finally subsided, Romero's youngest son passed away. With the water-warped road to his family cemetery impassable, Romero was not able to bury him with his ancestors. He wondered how anything could be salvaged after this.

"He would have been the first of the ninth generation buried in our family cemetery," Romero says. "So, it's been devastating in a lot of ways."

Romero is 71 years old. He knows he doesn't have the decades left in his lifetime to see the land restored to what it was. But he hopes to be a part of the conversation about what happens next, and what the land will look like for the generations that follow him.

The thing about the fire is that recovering from it will never really be done, at least not if you do it right. Post-wildfire landscapes require ongoing maintenance to rebuild and reduce its risk to residents, and the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak burn scar poses particularly salient threats due to the ongoing flood risks. Addressing that will continue to require interagency efforts, not to mention a continuing flow of funding.

Shaun Sanchez, the supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest, said in an April 2023 public webinar that there are no plans in the "immediate foreseeable future" to put more fire on the ground in the burn-scar region. Roads need to be cleared, dead trees need to be removed, drains need to be emptied, homes need to be rebuilt. But there are burns already being conducted within the larger Santa Fe National Forest, which spans 1.6 million acres.

There's a massive effort underway to revitalize the burned land, as well. As of early 2024, the New Mexico Natural Resources Conservation Service has mulched 30,000 acres and seeded 50,000 with a mix of annual and perennial native plants. This work is critical in stabilizing the soil and preventing more debris flows and erosion. The agency also has a long waiting list of areas to perform flood cleanup and mitigation.

Sanchez understands that building trust is another critical component to recovery. He occupies a unique space in the divide between federal officials and fire victims: a ninth-generation native of northern New Mexico, but one who has spent much of his career working for the federal government. When he introduces himself to me, he tells me his parents were among those evacuated during the Calf Canyon/Hermit's Peak Fire.

When I ask Sanchez what his advice is for residents like Ani or Vuchinich or Romero, who are eager to have their concerns heard, he suggests they call him directly. One-on-one conversations between federal officials and the thousands impacted by the burns is a daunting and admittedly unlikely task. But community-centered approaches to forest management have proven successful in giving people a forum to really be heard and have their questions addressed. The Forest Stewards Guild, a nonprofit based in Santa Fe, has been hosting prescribed burns for the past decade in partnership with a mix of tribal, local, state, federal, nonprofit, and private partners. Part of its preburn communication plan involves community meetings, explains Eytan Krasilovsky, the Stewards Guild's deputy director.

In Las Vegas, Luna Community College hosted workshops to help residents address common land-management issues on their properties, like reseeding their yards or filling in bulldozer tracks. The courses were popular enough that they applied for a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop certification programs that will teach some of the skills required in recovery and ongoing landscape management. This past summer, the USDA awarded the school $3 million to start a Wildfire Resiliency Training Center. Rafael D'Amato, the director, is a former fire chief, and he hopes the program can create opportunities for residents to have more of a say and hand in shaping the on-the-ground recovery.

"It's where they live, and they want to be involved," D'Amato says. "The forest is theirs, as well as everybody else's."

[*Cont. from 80*] When Chambers reaches out to me a few hours after the Merrimack incident, he's uncharacteristically rattled. "I won't lie I'm scared to death," he writes in a text message. When he calls a few days later, it's via the encrypted app Signal, and for the first time in any of our conversations, he seems to be choosing his words carefully. He says he's left the country, but makes it clear he's done nothing wrong by leaving. "I'm not hiding," he says. "It's not illegal."

The threat of RICO charges is sobering. "If people knew all the details, they'd understand why I'd go somewhere for the moment," Chambers says. "But they don't, so they just think the multimillionaire who groomed a bunch of young girls to get arrested for him dipped to get away from any responsibility."

He tells me police came to the property in Alford a few days earlier. Chambers suddenly found himself flashing back to the psychiatric interventions of his teenage years when he was taken from his home. "I was in a state of mortal terror," he says.

In the weeks that follow, there's more fallout. His neighbors in the Berkshires are alarmed by a series of stories that have run in local publications, and the town's select board forces Chambers to close the Berkshire People's Gym. In New Hampshire, the attorney general announces that due to a rise in hate crimes, the state is expanding its Civil Rights Unit, citing the Merrimack action as an incident the unit will investigate. In early December, Instagram shutters Chambers' account for violating its terms of service. The walls seem to be closing in on him.

"The U.S. looks like Germany 1932 to me," Chambers says when I talk to him over Signal in mid-December. "It's really scary." He's still out of the country, living in Tunis, Tunisia, with Schnabel and one of his children, and has no plans for a permanent return. "I'm not saying I'll never set foot, but the shift in public sentiment in the U.S. has been a real mask-off moment. You can be an organizer, you can do direct action, you can say agitative shit, and maybe they won't come after you hard. But if you do all that and have a lot of money, they're going to come after you so hard."

He's reevaluating many of the projects he's been working on the past few years. "Alford," he says, "is almost definitely done." He'll likely hold on to the New Hampshire properties, and he's thinking about setting up new bases, possibly around Atlanta or maybe somewhere abroad where he can focus energy and resources on "strengthening people's movements in the Global South." The Babochki Collective will continue more or less as is, just with Chambers participating from afar. He's been persuaded by "wiser comrades" that his resources are worth more than his on-the-ground participation. "Perhaps I have to grow up a little bit," he says.

He tells me there's another reason he wants to stay in Tunis. A few days earlier, he'd become a practicing Muslim. "A lot of people want to make me a meme: 'Oh, you want to be oppressed? You want to cosplay?' But it's doing a lot for me." Islam has eased his "discomfort in Western society and the world in general," and allowed him to stop leaning on unhealthy coping mechanisms, namely, as he puts it, "sex, drugs, and violence." In February, he and Schnabel were married in a private religious ceremony.

Truth be told, Chambers has never lacked faith. Whether it's communism, shamanism, jujitsu, or marriage, Chambers' problem has never been that he wasn't committed deeply enough. It's that he's never known where to stop. Just like with that dying kitten in the park, he goes further than others in the service of his convictions. He's not a con man or a charlatan, he's a true believer, and that might be more troubling. To look at his adult life from afar is to see someone searching for something – connection, camaraderie, love, justice – and believing he's found it, again and again.

In spite of all this – or irrespective of it – Chambers' wealth may do a lot of good one day, it may do some real evil, or it may just largely go to waste. Almost certainly, how you weigh that final calculus will depend as much on your politics as his.

What will happen to Chambers himself is harder to discern. At one point in our final extended conversation, he explains why he still feels obligated to speak out publicly – about Gaza, capitalism, everything. "We'll never build movements in anonymity," he says. "Real movements are built by martyrs."

Is that how his story ends?

I ask him, straight-out, if he wants to be a martyr. Is he hoping to die high off the people? He's taken aback.

"No, I don't want to do that," he says. A couple minutes later, he circles back to the idea, as if he's had more chance to consider it.

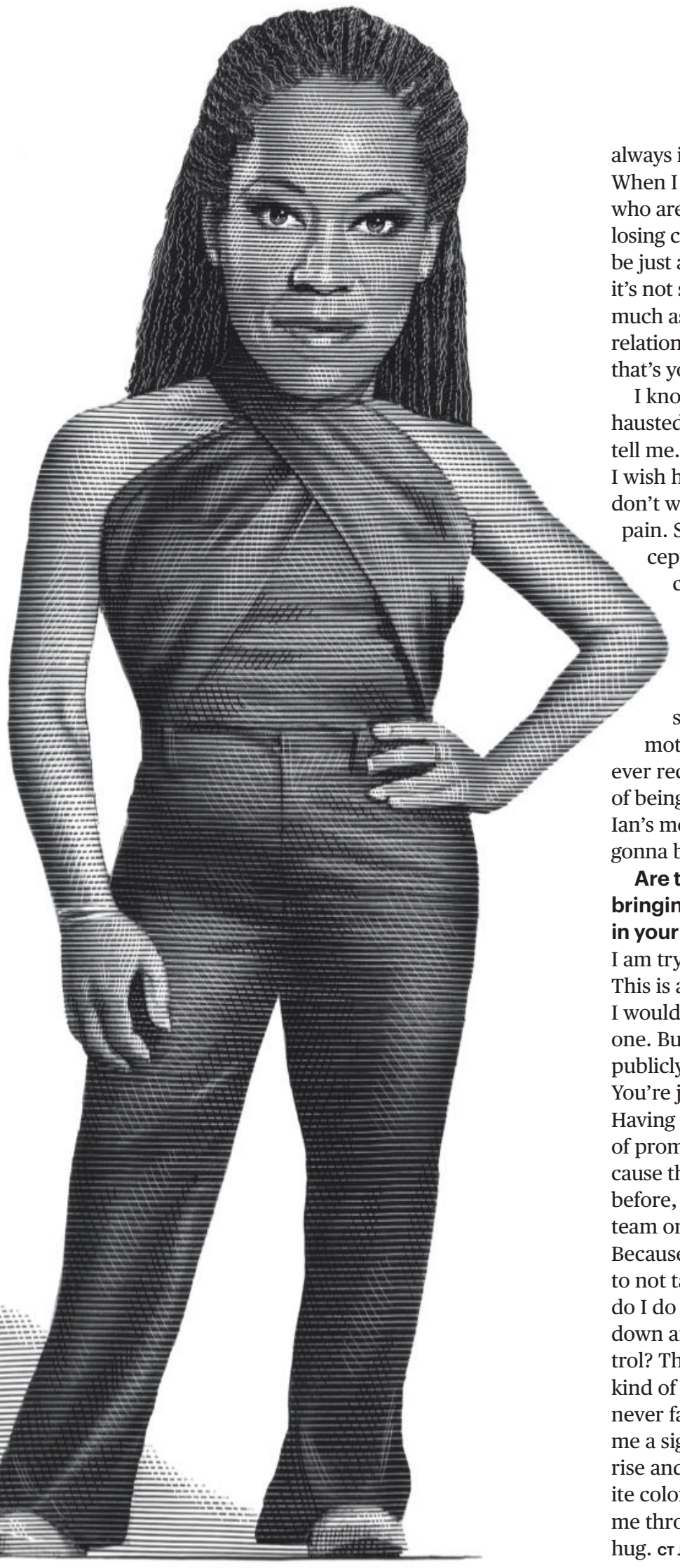
"To be a martyr?" he asks. "I mean, if I died fighting the U.S., I know I'd see paradise for it, I can say that. Does it mean I'm asking for it?"

For a moment, the question hangs in the air. Then he lets out a deep, throaty laugh.

"No."

Regina King

The actress on playing Shirley Chisholm, directing, and grief



You're playing Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to run for president. Do you find that with historical figures who reach mythic proportions, their accomplishments can supersede the more grounded facts about them?
I think that's true with any great figure. Whether it's a slice-of-life or a cradle-to-grave biography, I'm not interested in dedicating two hours to watching [something] and walking away not feeling any different.

King's film 'Shirley' premiered on Netflix on March 22.

What was most important to you with your approach to this portrayal?
The emotional likeness and the interior of Shirley. Imitating becomes a caricature a lot of the time. The biggest thing that I was concerned about [was that] my portrayal or embodiment of Shirley would be seen as an imitation as opposed to a celebration of a human being.... Hopefully, people will walk away more interested in galvanizing around someone [who] has that much fight in them. I'm not gonna try to even touch the political conversation because it's just so disappointing right now. I just wish I had some of that Shirley good-fight energy.

After the critical success of *One Night in Miami,* were you surprised more directing opportunities weren't banging down your door?
There were definitely directing opportunities there. What I would say is they were opportunities that weren't of interest to me. Unfortunately, this [is] a business of people wanting to be first at being second – all of a sudden you get an influx of civil rights scripts or scripts in a hotel, scripts in one room.

What draws you in about the experience of directing?
I love being the person that the idea starts from. And then you give these thoughts to your department heads, and they get excited and take it even further, and then bring things to the table that you may not have thought about. It's really fun. I love doing puzzles. Hardcore. I'm a puzzler. And so maybe a bit of that spirit is what's exciting.

I know you and your dog are on a walk right now. What's your favorite thing about having a pet?
Earl was [my son] Ian's dog, and when Ian moved on, I just felt like it ... I'm still a very spiritual person, and I felt like Ian was putting a lot of things in place to take care of me. And Earl, his love is unconditional. There's no judgment. When I'm sad, he just runs across the room. He thinks he's a small dog – he's 90 pounds – and he will literally try to hug me.

I was so sorry to hear about your son Ian's passing [in 2022]. What has the process of healing looked like for you?
Only people who have suffered a life-changing loss, traumatic loss, understand that you're always in a place of healing. When I speak to other people who are 16 or 18 years in after losing children, they seem to be just as broken as I am. So it's not so much healing as much as accepting that your relationship with [the] person that's your life has changed.

I know my baby was exhausted because he would tell me. And it's selfish to say I wish he was still here, but I don't want him to be here in pain. So it's acceptance. Accepting that the universe chose this as a journey for Ian. I wouldn't have it any other way. I would do it all over again the same way just to be his mother. The most joy I've ever received in my 53 years of being on this earth is being Ian's mom. And I'm always gonna be his mom.

Are there other things bringing you peace and joy in your life right now?
I am trying to figure that out. This is a devastating thing. I wouldn't wish this on anyone. But when you live out publicly, it just hits different. You're just not as trusting. Having to go on this journey of promoting projects because they all were started before, I had to talk with my team on how to navigate. Because I don't know how to not talk about Ian. How do I do that and not break down and be out of control? There's this constant kind of anxiety. And then it never fails – Ian will send me a sign. Sometimes a sunrise and sunset – Ian's favorite color is orange. They get me through. I feel like it's a hug. CT JONES

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